



Cats as Companions: Can Cats Help Tackle Loneliness?

A report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Cats
June 2020

Foreword

As a cat owner, and chair of APGOCATS and someone who has always delighted in having cats in my life I can confirm from my own experience and from that of the APGOCATS membership how cats provide companionship, love and enjoyment to owners of all ages. This report by the members of APGOCATS follows the Group's first inquiry which considered the potential of cats to tackle human loneliness.

Loneliness has been defined as 'a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship'.¹ It has many causes, and it is triggered differently depending on the individual person and their circumstances. It can be linked to anything that changes or reduces social contact, including major life changes such as divorce, job loss, moving into care, illness, having a child and retirement.²

Loneliness has been identified as one of the most pressing public health issues facing the UK, leading to the publication of the Government's **Strategy for tackling loneliness**.³ Cat ownership and interaction has the potential to complement the existing Strategy in combatting loneliness, bringing significant benefits for both people and cats.

APGOCATS recognises that the factors contributing towards individual loneliness are complex and that for some people cats will always be part of a range of solutions.

Cats are sentient creatures and it is important to consider their welfare alongside that of their owner. However, it is clear that this bond can be of great benefit to both.

In 2018 and 2019, APGOCATS took wide-ranging evidence, and attended the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Loneliness⁴ to build the recommendations contained in this report. The Group heard from APGOCATS members, charities outside of the animal welfare sector who work to help tackle loneliness, academics and housing providers about how cat ownership can help to tackle loneliness, and the benefits it will bring.

On behalf of APGOCATS I am delighted to present this report which sets out practical measures for Government, academics, housing providers, health care providers and other charities to develop and utilise, setting out a 'paw print' for future work on how cat ownership and interaction can help tackle loneliness.



Sheryll Murray

Sheryll Murray MP

Chair - All Party Parliamentary Group on Cats

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Cats⁵ (APGOCATS) is a cross party group of MPs, Peers and associate organisations with an interest in cat welfare, aiming to promote and further cat welfare issues and legislation in Parliament. APGOCATS seeks to support discussion and debate about what the public, charities, MPs and the Government can do to further cat welfare. The Group is jointly facilitated by Battersea, Blue Cross and Cats Protection on behalf of all the members.

¹ Perlman, D., & Peplau, L. A. (1981). 'Toward a Social Psychology of Loneliness', in R. Gilmour, & S. Duck (Eds.), *Personal Relationships: 3. Relationships in Disorder* (pp. 31-56). London: Academic Press

² <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/the-lonely-society>

³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/750909/6.4882_DCMS_Loneliness_Strategy_web_Update.pdf

⁴ <https://www.redcross.org.uk/appgloneliness>

⁵ <http://www.apgocats.co.uk/>

Contents

Executive Summary	4
Loneliness in Society	6
Scale of loneliness	6
Impact of loneliness on health	6
Effect of interpersonal relationships	7
Could cats help tackle loneliness?	8
The third sector perspective	8
Academic rationale	12
Rented housing restrictions on cat ownership	16
Social prescribing and individual care packages	20
Conclusions	25
Appendices	27
Appendix A	27
Appendix B	28

This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its committees. All-Party Parliamentary Groups are informal groups of Members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues. The views expressed in this report are those of the group. This Report was researched by and funded by Battersea, Blue Cross and Cats Protection. The authors of this report have written this on behalf of APGOCATS based on minutes of the evidence sessions conducted by the Group.



APGOCATS wishes to thank all the witnesses and organisations who provided evidence and information to the inquiry.

Executive Summary



Executive Summary

Loneliness is defined as 'a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship'.⁶ APGOCATS welcomes the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's Loneliness Strategy,⁷ in which the Government has recognised it as a public health crisis in the UK, which it has sought to tackle through the Strategy.

The Strategy does not fully explore the potential of pet ownership, including cats, in playing a part in countering loneliness. Factors contributing to individual loneliness are complex. However, cat ownership or interaction can be part of a range of interventions in society which can tackle the feelings of isolation. It is essential the relationship will work for the individual and meet the cat's welfare needs.⁸

Loneliness has an impact on a large section of UK society and across every demographic. The UK Government's most recent survey shows that 23% of UK adults feel lonely often, always or some of the time,⁹ a 2% increase from the previous year.¹⁰ Whilst loneliness is often seen as something that affects the elderly, the UK Government's findings show that younger people (49 years and younger) are reporting higher rates of often or always feeling lonely, 22% compared to 15% for the elderly.¹¹

Research has begun into the potential benefits to society of pet ownership. Research conducted in the USA showed that 80% of pet owners stated that their pet made them feel less lonely, with 89% of owners who got a pet specifically to combat loneliness stating a benefit.¹²

To investigate further the extent to which cats have the potential to help tackle loneliness, APGOCATS conducted evidence sessions and attended the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Loneliness, hearing from four main groups:

- **Third sector** – evidence from third sector organisations who directly deal with people experiencing loneliness
- **Academic research** – evidence and research into pet/cat ownership and its effect on loneliness
- **Housing providers** – evidence on how types of housing provision, particularly the rental sector, affect people's ability to be a cat owner and get potential companionship to prevent or help tackle loneliness
- **Healthcare providers** – evidence on how the benefits cats can provide in terms of companionship and enhanced wellbeing can be integrated into models of social prescribing and into individual care assessments

Through these evidence sessions and information gathering, APGOCATS received a wealth of information identifying where there was existing research, isolated current research gaps, and identified where there was potential to explore and develop further how cats can help tackle loneliness.

APGOCATS recommends that the next steps should be to:

- **A pilot of cat ownership and interaction within a social prescribing context.** Currently companion animal ownership or interaction is not widely promoted as an option for social prescribing practitioners. APGOCATS believes it could provide genuinely beneficial results.

APGOCATS recommends that health, and social service practitioners, Local Authorities, the newly launched National Academy for Social Prescribing¹³ and Clinical Commissioning Groups pilot social prescribing models involving cats such as volunteering/fostering for an animal welfare charity or if appropriate for the individual, getting a cat as a pet. This should be done in collaboration with third sector organisations working in social prescribing to ensure feline welfare is considered alongside human wellbeing.

- **Improve the evidence base.** Most of the evidence showing a positive relationship between pet ownership and improving loneliness is piecemeal; there is limited academic research and still less that differentiates cats from other pets.

APGOCATS recommends that specific new academic, longitudinal research is commissioned by Government across a range of demographics and life stages to evidence how cats can help tackle loneliness in society. The research should involve health professionals and third sector organisations working with those at risk of or experiencing loneliness.

- **Enabling renters to own or foster a cat more easily.** Housing policy continues to be an issue where pet policies in the rental sector prohibit pet ownership. People are renting their homes in increasing numbers across the country, yet the availability of pet-friendly accommodation remains low. This means those living in rented accommodation who may benefit from the companionship of a cat are being denied the opportunity, with a stigma remaining among landlords reinforcing the negative stereotypes of pet-owning tenants. Pet-friendly rentals are generally more expensive and harder to find.

APGOCATS recommends that Government works in collaboration with private and social housing providers

and charities to explore ways of encouraging more cat-friendly tenancies - including a round table with landlord and tenant representatives.

- **Provision of information and advice about responsible cat ownership and its benefits.**

Information on the benefits of cat ownership is not always available to those experiencing loneliness and who may potentially benefit, particularly at significant times of life change.

APGOCATS recommends that the wealth of information on cat care, adoption, lifetime costs of a pet etc. that is provided by animal organisations is widely shared by agencies and professionals that work with those experiencing or at risk of loneliness. Government could play a co-ordinating role in this process.

- **Cats to be incorporated into health assessments and personalised care plans.** Under the Care Act 2014¹⁴ individuals requiring care can receive support for their wellbeing. However, provision for the care of someone's pets is not currently considered in care and support plans.

APGOCATS recommends Government ensures that assessments and personalised care plans include consideration of any companion animals that form part of the individual's household. Where an individual's care can be more suitably provided in a care home or retirement complex, provided the accommodation is suitable for a cat and there are clear protocols in place, APGOCATS recommends that residents are allowed to have a cat. To achieve this, APGOCATS urges Government to work closely with care home providers, retirement complexes and animal welfare charities.

Cat companionship should be coupled with other interventions to tackle loneliness. The factors underlying loneliness are often multiple and complex, and cat ownership or interaction could be part of the solution, depending on individual circumstances.

⁶ Perlman, D., & Peplau, L. A. (1981). 'Toward a Social Psychology of Loneliness', in R. Gilmour, & S. Duck (Eds.), *Personal Relationships: 3. Relationships in Disorder* (pp. 31-56). London: Academic Press

⁷ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/750909/6.4882_DCMS_Loneliness_Strategy_web_Update.pdf

⁸ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/45/contents>

⁹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/820610/Community_Life_Survey_2018-19_report.pdf

¹⁰ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/734726/Community_Life_Survey_2017-18_statistical_bulletin.pdf

¹¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/820610/Community_Life_Survey_2018-19_report.pdf

¹² <https://www.waltham.com/news-events/human-animal-interaction/pets-against-loneliness/5788/>

¹³ <http://www.socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/>

¹⁴ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/23/contents/enacted>

Loneliness in Society



Scale of Loneliness

Loneliness affects a large section of UK society. In 2019 the UK Government's most recent findings that show 23% of UK adults feel lonely often, always or some of the time.¹⁵ While loneliness is often seen as something that affects the elderly, the UK Government's findings show that younger people (49 and younger) are reporting higher rates of 'often or always' feeling loneliness at 22% compared to 15% for the elderly.¹⁶

Loneliness has been defined as 'a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship'.¹⁷ It is specific to the individual, affecting people in different ways. There are situations in which some people will feel lonely while others will not. However, there are many circumstances that heighten the risk of loneliness including poverty, unemployment, periods of change, retirement, disability, old age and mental illness. The causes of loneliness include but are not limited to, divorce, job loss, moving into care, illness, having a child and retirement.¹⁸ The factors underlying loneliness are often complex.

Impacts of loneliness on Health

Loneliness is most commonly associated with impacts on mental health, with 60% of people experiencing loneliness in the UK stating it has had a negative impact on their mental health. Furthermore, 30% of people experiencing loneliness in the UK said it led to them thinking about harming themselves.¹⁹ A survey for the Mental Health Foundation also found that 4 in 10 people reported that they had felt depressed due to loneliness at some point.²⁰

However, there can also be impacts on physical health. 49% of people experiencing loneliness in the UK said it had a negative impact on them physically.²¹ Loneliness is linked to a range of physical health problems such as coronary heart disease, strokes, Alzheimer's disease and ultimately early death, increasing the risk of mortality by 26%. Its impact is so severe that it is considered by the Government's Strategy to be on par with other public health crises such as smoking and obesity.²²

Loneliness and mental health: 30% of people experiencing loneliness in the UK said it led to them thinking about harming themselves.²³ Loneliness is linked to a higher risk of depression and low self-esteem.²⁴

Loneliness and physical health: Research has determined five causal pathways between loneliness and ill health:²⁵

1. Reduced self-regulation due to low self-esteem and need for quick gratification leads to the adoption of harmful habits such as overeating, smoking and substance abuse directly affecting physical health
2. Increased exposure to stress as the feeling that something is wrong caused by a lack of social contact leads to a physical response as if a person is being threatened
3. Withdrawing from emotional connections with others decreases the opportunity for individuals to benefit from social support for their health
4. Loneliness negatively affects the immune and cardiovascular systems
5. Difficulty sleeping, which has the same effect on metabolic, neural and hormonal regulation as ageing.

Effect of interpersonal relationships

Loneliness can also affect relationships with other people, with 55% of people experiencing loneliness in the UK saying it has had a negative impact on their personal relationships.²⁶

Professional relationships can also be affected, with 32% of people experiencing loneliness in the UK saying it has had a negative impact on their ability to do their job.²⁷ Employees experiencing loneliness can be linked to poor performance, whereas good social interactions at work are associated with increased productivity. It is estimated that loneliness could be costing private employers up to £2.5 billion a year due to absence and lower productivity.²⁸

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It is clear therefore that loneliness presents a public health crisis in the UK, not only affecting people's mental health, but also their physical health and productivity for employers and the UK economy. Preventative measures to tackle loneliness are the best option. Studies have estimated that every £1 spent on specific, effective anti-loneliness strategies saves society £2 to £3.²⁹

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¹⁵ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/820610/Community_Life_Survey_2018-19_report.pdf

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Perlman, D., & Peplau, L. A. (1981). 'Toward a Social Psychology of Loneliness', in R. Gilmour, & S. Duck (Eds.), *Personal Relationships: 3. Relationships in Disorder* (pp. 31-56). London: Academic Press

¹⁸ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/the-lonely-society>

¹⁹ <http://files.kff.org/attachment/Report-Loneliness-and-Social-Isolation-in-the-United-States-the-United-Kingdom-and-Japan-An-International-Survey>

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²² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/750909/6.4882_DCMS_Loneliness_Strategy_web_Update.pdf

²³ <http://files.kff.org/attachment/Report-Loneliness-and-Social-Isolation-in-the-United-States-the-United-Kingdom-and-Japan-An-International-Survey>

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/the-lonely-society>

²⁶ <http://files.kff.org/attachment/Report-Loneliness-and-Social-Isolation-in-the-United-States-the-United-Kingdom-and-Japan-An-International-Survey>

²⁷ <http://files.kff.org/attachment/Report-Loneliness-and-Social-Isolation-in-the-United-States-the-United-Kingdom-and-Japan-An-International-Survey>

²⁸ <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/cost-of-loneliness-2017.pdf>

²⁹ <http://www.lse.ac.uk/business-and-consultancy/consulting/assets/documents/making-the-economic-case-for-investing-in-actions-to-prevent-and-or-tackle-loneliness-a-systematic-review.pdf>

Could cats help tackle loneliness?



Cats are popular pets with 10.9 million owned cats in the UK.³⁰ They provide companionship, love and enjoyment to owners of all ages. Although in some cases cat ownership or interaction will not be appropriate, in others cats can be a positive part of the solution.

The Loneliness Strategy does not fully explore the potential of pet ownership and interaction as a tool to help tackle loneliness. Through the APGOCATS' inquiry, the Group wanted to review evidence and provide recommendations about how cats might help tackle loneliness. The inquiry identified where more research and understanding are needed to guide future work.

A recent Blue Cross report highlighted that animal welfare organisations are actively working with people experiencing loneliness, through a range of interventions to support them and their pets.³¹

The third sector perspective

In addition to the contributions from the cat welfare charities within the Group's membership, APGOCATS received evidence from Age UK,³² Campaign to End Loneliness,³³ Independent Age,³⁴ Mind³⁵ and the Samaritans.³⁶ All of these charities work directly or indirectly to combat loneliness.

The witnesses highlighted that loneliness is often linked to other mental health issues and this can affect people's ability to make social connections. This is evident as nine in ten people with mental health problems report experiencing stigma as a result. A prevention agenda would be preferred by many witnesses to deal with issues such as loneliness, to lessen the burden on statutory bodies.

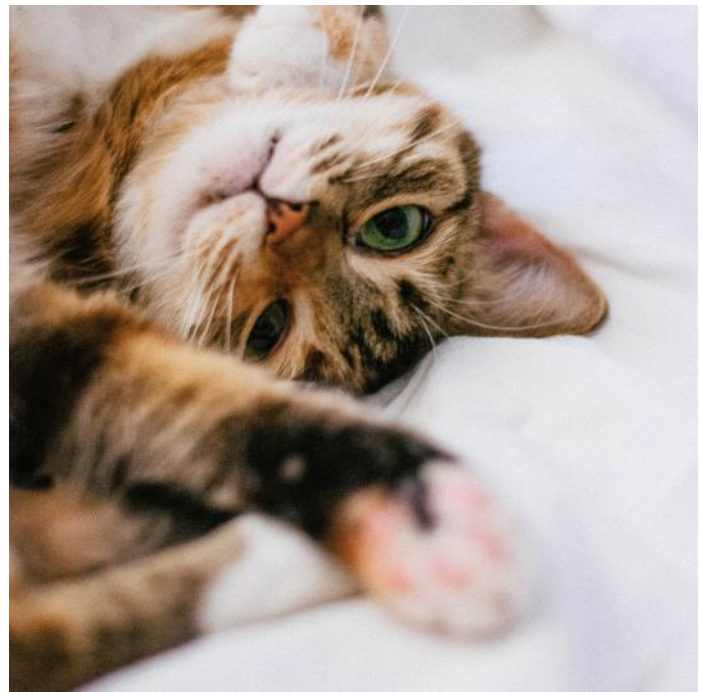
Age UK stated that one in three older³⁷ people have a pet, and of these approximately 50% have a cat. However, pet ownership decreases as people get older. Age UK has reported that pet ownership can help tackle loneliness in older people, by giving them something to care for, and providing companionship if they are less able to socialise outside the home. Cats in these types of situations could be beneficial as they are generally more independent than some other pets.

The Campaign to End Loneliness provided information on the three main ways in which loneliness could be tackled and how cat ownership could help:

1. **Self-help** – They suggested that this was a major area where cat ownership could be promoted, as it is the individual who can take proactive steps to self-medicate.
2. **Social prescribing** – This can take many forms but the NHS in England is rolling out a model of 6-12 sessions with a professional to help people understand what would help them address their own loneliness, such as cat ownership.
3. **Group activities** – These can be either be structured, provided by a professional body or in a more informal setting, such as people meeting to discuss specific topic or perhaps volunteering for an animal charity.

Independent Age has specific advice for people who are experiencing loneliness through their 'If you're feeling lonely' booklet.³⁸ Within this, they promote pet ownership as a way of having companionship at home as pets can provide unconditional love.

Pets are also promoted in care homes where they are not necessarily the responsibility of one person. However, research conducted by Blue Cross found that only 40% of care homes were pet-friendly and there are often discrepancies in what this practically means,³⁹ as there is no definition of best practice for care homes or sheltered housing providers to work from when establishing their own policies.



³⁰ PDSA Animal Wellbeing (PAW) Report, PDSA, 2019

³¹ <https://admin.bluecross.org.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/A%20Link%20in%20the%20Chain.pdf>

³² <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/>

³³ <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/>

³⁴ <https://www.independentage.org/>

³⁵ <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

³⁶ <https://www.samaritans.org/>

³⁷ Oral evidence obtained during first evidence session from Age UK representative

³⁸ https://independent-age-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2019-05/Advice-Guide-If-youre-feeling-lonely.pdf_0.pdf

³⁹ <https://www.bluecross.org.uk/charity-calls-end-heartbreak-older-pet-owners-entering-care>

Cats in care

Mars Petcare worked with Leicester Animal Aid and Legra Residential Care Home to bring about the re-homing of a cat to help address loneliness amongst the residents.

The team at Mars Petcare worked closely with Legra to find a pet that would be suitable for residents, giving them something to care for and act as a comfort through periods of uncertainty.

The residents at Legra decided to adopt Bunny, who had an amazing impact on the residents, offering them something to think about, someone to look after, and making them feel more part of society. One of Legra's residents highlighted how Bunny helped her cope with a recent bereavement, saying; 'She fills a hole that was left when my William died and I knew I would probably come into a care home... She's company.'

"She fills a hole that was left when my William died and I knew I would probably come into a care home... She's company."

Lynne, Resident.



Legra Manager Joyce Banning has said that she would definitely recommend other homes to adopt a cat: 'The advice I would give them: 'don't think about it too much, consult with your residents, ask them what they want and if they want the cat, get the cat because life's too short...and sometimes you just have to go with your heart'.

Community volunteering

Cats Protection's Cat Watch scheme developed community hubs in deprived areas across the country, bringing local people together to monitor stray cat populations.

Not only did this improve feline welfare, it also helped tackle loneliness, enabling local people to make friends and develop new skills. The scheme in Everton has been praised for building a social support function, with over half of residents in the area saying the project had achieved a positive impact for cats and the community.

Cats Protection Community Neutering Officer Rachele Follini for the Everton Cat Watch said: "The volunteers and helpers that come along to our weekly hub meetings tell us it's been a great way to meet new friends in the community. Many have told us it gives them something to look forward to each week and a chance to learn new things. It's been great to see so many cats benefit from the scheme, but also to see the camaraderie develop between people who may otherwise have never met or become involved in a community activity."



"It's been great to see so many cats benefit from the scheme, but also to see the camaraderie develop between people who may otherwise have never met or become involved in a community activity."

Rachele Follini, Everton Cat Watch.



Several charities highlighted similar barriers to experiencing the benefits of the companionship of cats. Specifically, three issues were raised:

1. Currently pets are not seen as a viable social prescribing mechanism and this will need to be addressed with the health services.
2. Loneliness and mental health issues can have a negative effect on finding suitable housing and this can be made even harder if the person has pets.
3. Academic evidence regarding the benefits of pet ownership to loneliness is limited and mainly focuses on dogs.

Academic rationale

APGOCATS received evidence from Brunel University⁴⁰ and WALTHAM Centre for Pet Nutrition.⁴¹ These organisations have carried out considerable research into the human/ animal bond and its potential development as a tool for tackling loneliness. The witnesses highlighted that more academic attention is being given to loneliness as it affects people of all ages.

Research has identified three different types of loneliness that affects people:

- Those experiencing it for the first time
- People recovering from something in their life e.g. bereavement
- Those with enduring loneliness e.g. mental health issues, dementia, limited mobility

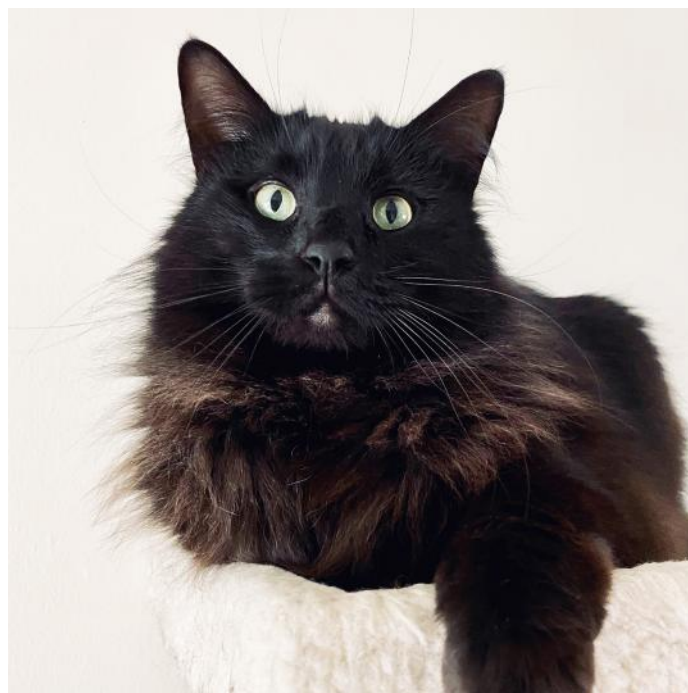
It can be difficult to differentiate between these groups and potential treatments. Brunel University found that research evaluating treatments was poor as it did not address sub-sections of society and did not follow people over time. Similarly, the majority of research focuses on the over 50s age group. It is clear there is still scope for more research on loneliness across all age groups, as it affects younger people too.

There is insufficient specific research on pets and loneliness. However, the limited research currently available in this area has indicated that there is a potential for pets to play a role in tackling loneliness in society. In the USA, early research showed that within one month of getting a pet, 80% of people reported reduced feelings of loneliness, with 89% of owners who took on a pet specifically to combat loneliness stating a benefit.⁴²

In the USA, early research showed that within one month of getting a pet, 80% of people reported reduced feelings of loneliness, with 89% of owners who took on a pet specifically to combat loneliness stating a benefit.

Witnesses commented on the lack of specific research in relation to cats and loneliness. However, there have been some studies into social capital from pets and human-animal interaction. This work concluded that people are six times more likely to make a friend in a new area if they have a pet (including if that pet is a cat).⁴³

There have also been other studies into human-animal interactions around children with conditions such as autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.⁴⁴ These have shown benefits of pet ownership, with 22 of 28 studies showing animal interactions positively increased social interactions for those with autism.⁴⁵ More research, however, is needed into the role pets and specifically cats can play in helping people experiencing loneliness and how it can bring similar benefits.



There is variance in the evidence assessing the benefit of cat ownership in order to reduce loneliness. Evidence from research conducted by WALTHAM shows that 54% of pet owners found socialising 'easier' upon getting a pet.⁴⁶ However, one study published by National Center for Biotechnology Information that looked at social isolation as a specific trigger of loneliness, found that cat ownership is of little benefit.⁴⁷ The inconsistent evidence base demonstrates that there is a need for more in-depth research to ascertain the true value of cat ownership and how it can impact on loneliness and its different triggers.

⁴⁰ <https://www.brunel.ac.uk/people/christina-victor/research>

⁴¹ <https://www.waltham.com/>

⁴² <https://www.waltham.com/news-events/human-animal-interaction/pets-against-loneliness/5788/>

⁴³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5769067/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10888691.2016.1252263>

⁴⁵ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10888691.2016.1243988>

⁴⁶ Information provided by Mars Petcare

⁴⁷ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/31364868>

Life changes and loneliness

After completing a four-year degree in law, Amy found herself at a difficult crossroads in her life.

Unsure of what to do next, she returned to live with her parents in the small town of Andover, Hampshire. With her supportive network of friends now scattered throughout the country, Amy found it hard to adjust and missed the familiarity and routine of university life.

She soon found comfort from the family cats, Harry and Holly, who helped provide the companionship Amy needed as she's figured out her next steps. Amy said: "It was a real shock to go from living with four other girls and always having company, to be back in my old family home in a small town. I didn't know what I wanted to do next, the days felt long, and I felt very lonely. Just having Harry and Holly around was such a great help and meant I was never alone. Even when I went for a walk, they will often trot alongside.

The company of the cats was just what I needed - they didn't ask me stressful career questions or expect me to have a life plan. They helped me take one day at a time, and calmed my mind when everything seemed on top of me."

"The company of the cats was just what I needed - they didn't ask me stressful career questions or expect me to have a life plan."

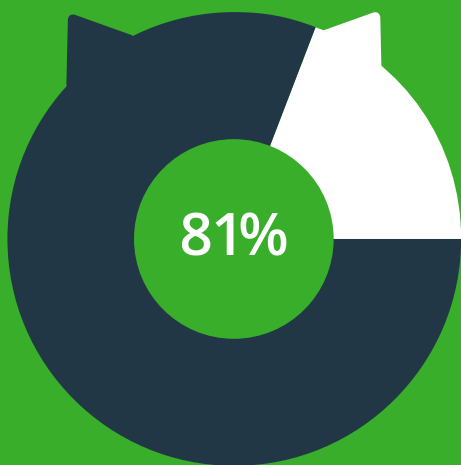
Amy.



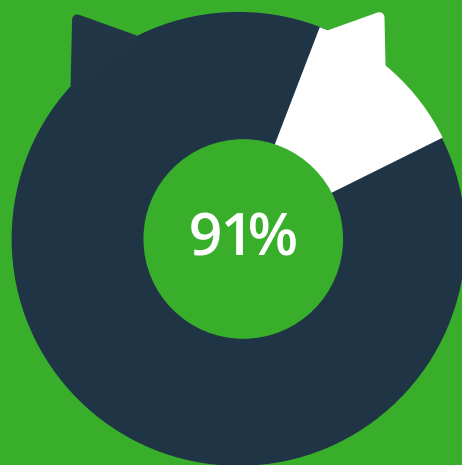
Five years later, Amy now works in financial services and is planning on buying her first home. She is now a volunteer for Cats Protection in her spare time.

The limited academic research could be complemented by research being undertaken by the third sector.

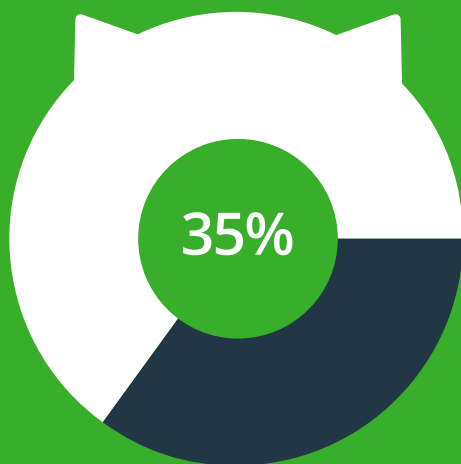
PDSA have carried out their PDSA Animal Wellbeing (PAW) report⁴⁸ every year since 2011. For the report 2,266 cat owners were surveyed and relevant findings on the topic of loneliness are:



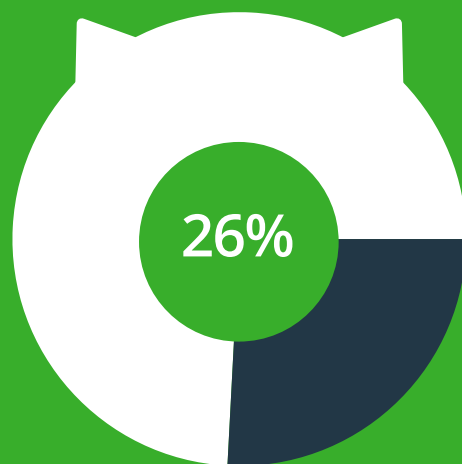
81% of cat owners say that owning a cat makes them feel less lonely.



91% of 18-34 year olds agreed that owning a cat made them feel less lonely which is significantly more than the 65+ group where **70%** agreed⁴⁹



35% of owners said they got a cat to provide love and affection⁵⁰



26% of cat owners said they got a cat for companionship⁵¹

⁴⁸ https://www.pdsa.org.uk/media/7420/2019-paw-report_downloadable.pdf

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.



Rented housing restrictions on cat ownership

Throughout the evidence sessions, landlord policies not allowing pets were identified as a barrier to the health and wellbeing of tenants. A recent Blue Cross report highlighted cost, a lack of accessible services and deteriorating health, as well as housing as key factors that hindered ownership and interaction.⁵² Evidence was given by the National Landlords Association⁵³ (NLA, who represent private residential landlords) and Peabody Group⁵⁴ (a social housing provider). Loneliness is a known issue in rented accommodation, according to the witnesses. For example, Peabody Group collects data on when their tenants self-report cases of loneliness, which is highest at either end of the age spectrum of tenants. They will then work with the tenant if a pet is required to combat loneliness.

The number of privately rented homes in the UK more than doubled between 2002 and 2016 and continues to increase year on year.^{55 56 57 58} 38% of all UK households are currently rented either in the private or social sector, which is predicted to rise to 40% by 2025.⁵⁹ Therefore, housing pet policies can have a large impact for many who rent their home and want to be able to have a pet.

Research conducted into the benefits of pet ownership for women living alone found that those without pets were lonelier than those living with pets.⁶⁰

The research also found that cats provide emotional benefits for people living alone and are an 'important source of unconditional love, affection and companionship'.⁶¹

Those living alone are significantly less likely to own their home.⁶² Therefore, when it comes to pet ownership, this group are more likely to be affected by the issues associated with restrictive tenancy policies. With the number of people living alone set to rise dramatically in coming years,⁶³ we need to ensure the benefits of pet ownership can be enjoyed by all.

⁵² <https://admin.bluecross.org.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/A%20Link%20in%20the%20Chain.pdf>

⁵³ <https://landlords.org.uk/>

⁵⁴ <https://www.peabody.org.uk/home>

⁵⁵ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/609282/Dwelling_Stock_Estimates_2016_England.pdf

⁵⁶ <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Housing-Regeneration/HSfS/KeyInfoTables>



CASE STUDY: BATTERSEA

Hannah and Lady Josephine

Lady Josephine was between 7 and 10 years old when she was adopted from Battersea by Hannah.

"I'd never owned a cat before Lady Jo and now I'd struggle to imagine my life without her furry face and happy chit chat! She has helped me through a very painful divorce, two stressful house and career moves, many failed dating experiences, in fact she's caught so many tears over the years I'm surprised her fur is ever dry, but we also celebrate in style too."

"I'd never owned a cat before Lady Jo and now I'd struggle to imagine my life without her furry face and happy chit chat! "

Hannah.

⁵⁷ <http://gov.wales/docs/statistics/2017/170427-dwelling-stock-estimates-2015-16-en.pdf>

⁵⁸ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-housing-statistics-2016-17>

⁵⁹ <https://www.pwc.co.uk/assets/pdf/ukeyo-section3-housing-market-july-2015.pdf>

⁶⁰ Zasloff, R.L. & Kidd, A. H. (1994). Loneliness and pet ownership among single women. *Psychological Reports*, 75, 747-752

⁶¹ Zasloff, R.L. & Kidd, A. H. (1994). Attachment to feline companions. *Psychological Reports*, 74, 747-752

⁶² <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/articles/thecostoflivingalone/2019-04-04>

⁶³ Ibid.

Landlords enabling tenants who rent to have pets is both the right thing to do from a health and wellbeing perspective, but also makes commercial sense as pet owners will often make long-term reliable tenants. This has been recently identified by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, which is redrafting the model tenancy agreement to make it easier for private renters to keep their pets.⁶⁴

The issue of lack of availability of pet-friendly housing has also been recently highlighted to both the private and social rental sectors through Cats Protection's Purrfect Landlords report⁶⁵ and Battersea's Pet Friendly Properties report.⁶⁶ These reports provide landlords with advice and resources to encourage them to allow pets, whilst also safeguarding their properties and addressing any concerns they might have.

There remains a reluctance amongst private landlords to allow cats as they fear that cats may cause damage to properties, and nuisance in communal areas. However, Cats Protection found that 83% of private landlords who allow cats had never experienced any damage to the property, its contents or garden.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, despite evidence that cats rarely cause problems, Battersea reports that the second largest reason for people giving up their pets to the charity is due to housing complications.

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In the private sector, pet ownership could lead to higher rents or deposits or landlords not accepting pets at all. Renting in the private sector with pets is now perhaps even more challenging since the introduction of the Tenant Fees Act 2019⁶⁸ which capped deposits in England at five weeks' rent for most rented properties. This has had the unintended effect of dissuading many landlords from renting to those with pets. Similarly, although 'no pets' policies have been deemed unfair under trade descriptions it remains a legal grey area and may still occur. In cases where issues arise with pets in accommodation these issues usually concern dogs, however for both types of accommodation this is anecdotal evidence.

There are 1,708 registered social landlords managing 3.4 million properties,⁶⁹ compared to the 42,000 private landlords that the NLA represents. Additionally, social tenants stay in their accommodation for longer, 11 years compared to 4 years in the private sector. There are large inconsistencies in the sector's pet policies. For example, in London, it can depend on the type of accommodation and the access to a garden. This could, as with private accommodation, cause complications for cat ownership.

Some social housing providers undoubtedly demonstrate good practice. Peabody Group allow pets providing certain conditions are met, related to the type of accommodation being rented.⁷⁰

There are potential ways to provide landlords with assurance that a cat would be suitable for rented accommodation, such as providing a reference from a previous landlord or a pet CV. In the East Midlands, this is being practiced by an organisation called AdvoCATSeastmids who aim to dispel the myths around the risks of cat ownership. Through the evidence sessions it was clear that this type of service would be welcomed by the housing sector.

⁶⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/jenrick-overhauls-tenancy-agreement-to-help-end-pet-bans>

⁶⁵ https://www.cats.org.uk/uploads/documents/block/COM_2997_Purrfect_landlords_report_HIGHRES.pdf

⁶⁶ <http://www.bdch.org.uk/files/Pet-Friendly-Properties-Report.pdf>

⁶⁷ https://www.cats.org.uk/uploads/documents/block/COM_2997_Purrfect_landlords_report_HIGHRES.pdf

⁶⁸ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2019/4>

⁶⁹ <http://www.bdch.org.uk/files/Pet-Friendly-Properties-Report.pdf>

⁷⁰ <https://www.peabodysales.co.uk/blog/peabody-news/keeping-a-pet-in-a-peabody-home-our-new-pet-policy/>

Rehoming an indoor cat with a big personality

Steve was a bit of a loner, especially since his closest family had recently moved overseas. He lived on his own in a housing association flat, and was keen to get a cat for company, but uncertain if a flat was a suitable home for a cat.

On having the concept of indoor cats explained, he asked the housing association for permission to adopt, but was told no, and, thinking that was an end to the matter, was hugely disappointed.

When AdvoCATS spoke to the housing association, we were told that pets weren't allowed at properties with a communal entrance and/or garden – they weren't familiar with indoor cats either!

AdvoCATS wrote to the housing association on Steve's behalf, and Steve was subsequently allowed to have his cat – he is now happily enslaved by a small cat with a big personality and is much happier as a result.





Social prescribing and individual care packages

Social prescribing enables primary health professionals and local agencies to refer patients to a range of services that offer support specifically for emotional, practical or social needs in the local community.⁷¹ These referrals are sent through a link worker who is responsible for developing individual social care plans which are based on the patient's specific case and needs (e.g. to specifically tackle their personal causes of loneliness rather than as a generic catch-all solution). The link worker is then responsible for connecting them to specific statutory services and community groups based on the individual's needs.⁷² Social prescribing is designed to give people more control of their care.

The NHS aims to have social prescribing in place across the UK by 2021, with 1,000 new link workers in England facilitating 900,000 referrals by 2023/24.⁷³ This is expected, through the new National Academy of Social prescribing,⁷⁴ to lead to a reduction of the burden on frontline services, with 59% of GPs stating that they believe it will reduce their workloads⁷⁵ by shifting the focus from curative to preventative care.

Social prescribing has the potential to benefit many who experience loneliness. Typically, social prescribing focuses on activities that the patient would not normally do, such as arts, walking, gardening or other outdoor pursuits.⁷⁶ Activities designated for social prescribing do not include pet ownership or interaction but this could be considered.

Research carried out on companion animal economics shows that pet ownership provides a cost saving to the NHS of £2.45 billion⁷⁷ annually due to a reduced frequency of doctors' visits. This saving could be increased if cat interaction was used as an aid to combat loneliness, and the Group would like to see further research to ascertain if there are definitive benefits and cost savings. This could encompass a pilot scheme to research the potential benefit for patients whose circumstances and individual care requirements could accommodate cat ownership or other activities where they can interact with cats.

⁷¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/750909/6.4882_DCMS_Loneliness_Strategy_web_Update.pdf

⁷² <https://www.england.nhs.uk/personalisedcare/social-prescribing/>

⁷³ *Ibid*

⁷⁴ <http://www.socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/>

⁷⁵ <https://www.rcgp.org.uk/about-us/news/2018/may/rcgp-calls-on-government-to-facilitate-social-prescribing-for-all-practices.aspx>

⁷⁶ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/social-prescribing-community-based-support-summary-guide.pdf>

⁷⁷ <https://www.lincoln.ac.uk/news/2016/12/1300.asp>

Cats in direct health care

The Royal Hospital for Neuro-disability in Putney treats adults that have suffered profound brain injuries - some residents only stay for a short time, but for others it has become their home. Staff at the hospital contacted Battersea about potentially getting a cat.

Battersea staff worked with the hospital to find the ideal cat that would be needed to interact with patients. It didn't take long until Sox was found, a loving and confident cat who enjoyed human companionship with everyone he met. A year on, he has settled in really well and the patients and residents love him.

Sox has not only become a special friend to the patients recovering from severe brain injuries, but also to the hardworking staff who say Sox will never truly realise the happiness he has brought to people's lives, but they make sure he feels loved by giving him lots of cuddles and strokes.



“Sox will never truly realise the happiness he has brought to people's lives, but they make sure he feels loved by giving him lots of cuddles and strokes.”

**Staff at The Royal Hospital
for Neuro-disability.**

When considering including interaction with cats as part of social prescribing, it is important for people to be aware of cats' needs as well as those of people. It is essential to get the right cat for the person and their environment so that the cat can exhibit normal behaviour whilst providing a benefit for the individual experiencing loneliness. Social prescribing could also include volunteering with an animal charity which can allow interactions with cats, if cat ownership is not suitable.



Social prescribing could also include volunteering with an animal charity which can allow interactions with cats, if cat ownership is not suitable.

Since the introduction of the Care Act 2014⁷⁸ individuals requiring care can receive support for their wellbeing. APGOCATS explored the possibility of assistance with caring for a cat being provided to individuals who receive care and are experiencing loneliness when they have an individual care assessment. For example, whether it was possible for individuals to receive support with looking after their cat. In response to a parliamentary question tabled by former APGOCATS Co-Chair, Steve Reed MP, the Government clarified that:

*"Personal budgets (particularly direct payments) are designed to be used flexibly and innovatively and so there should be no unreasonable restriction placed on the use of the payment, as long as it is being used to meet eligible care and support needs in line with the care and support plan agreed between those requiring care and their local team which includes healthcare professionals."*⁷⁹

The Group would like to see the individual's pet care needs considered as part of the care assessment and incorporated in their care and support plan.

⁷⁸ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/23/contents/enacted>

⁷⁹ <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2019-04-29/248695/>

Support for those who have lost a pet

Blue Cross runs a Pet Bereavement Support Service (PBSS).

Owners can contact the charity through email and telephone regarding the loss or theft of their pet, coming to terms with a pet's illness, or considering euthanasia. In 2019, 14,209 calls and emails were answered by the 102 PBSS trained volunteers. Diane James, PBSS Manager says "We often have calls and emails, from people who have suffered the loss of a beloved pet, it may be their last link to a loved one or their only companion, we support them and sign post if needed, having us to talk to helps them have some contact, in an otherwise lonely day."



"We often have calls and emails, from people who have suffered the loss of a beloved pet, it may be their last link to a loved one or their only companion."

Diane James, PBSS Manager.

Conclusion and recommendations



Loneliness is a complex issue that affects the mental and physical health of people in all sections of society. This inquiry has highlighted that there is initial evidence that cats can help tackle loneliness. It is clear that more quantitative and qualitative research is needed on the extent to which cat ownership or interaction could help those experiencing or at risk of loneliness.

Cat ownership or interaction has the potential to act as a tool to tackle loneliness in specific situations. It should be considered alongside other activities tailored to the individual's needs. It is important to understand the complexities and individual triggers of a person's loneliness. It is also vital to remember that a cat is a sentient creature with welfare needs of its own and must be cared for responsibly.

To ensure that cat companionship is a viable tool to tackle loneliness several barriers need to be overcome. APGOCATS recommends that the next steps should be:

- **A pilot of cat ownership and interaction within a social prescribing context.** Currently pet ownership or interaction is not widely promoted as an option for social prescribing practitioners. APGOCATS believes it could provide genuinely beneficial results.

APGOCATS recommends that health, and social service practitioners, Local Authorities, the newly launched National Academy for Social Prescribing⁸⁰ and Clinical Commissioning Groups pilot social prescribing models involving cats such as volunteering/fostering for an animal welfare charity or if appropriate for the individual, getting a cat as a pet. This should be done in collaboration with third sector organisations working in social prescribing to ensure feline welfare is considered alongside human wellbeing.

- **Improve the evidence base.** Most of the evidence showing a positive relationship between pet ownership and improving loneliness is piecemeal; there is limited academic research and still less that differentiates cats from other pets.

APGOCATS recommends that specific new academic, longitudinal research is commissioned by Government across a range of demographics and life stages to evidence how cats can help tackle loneliness in society. The research should involve health professionals and third sector organisations working with those at risk of or experiencing loneliness.

- **Enabling renters to own or foster a cat more easily.**

Housing policy continues to be an issue where pet policies in the rental sector prohibit pet ownership. People are renting their homes in increasing numbers across the country, yet the availability of pet-friendly accommodation remains low. This means those living in rented accommodation who may benefit from the companionship of a cat are being denied the opportunity, with a stigma remaining among landlords reinforcing the negative stereotypes of pet-owning tenants. Pet-friendly rentals are generally more expensive and harder to find.

Those living in rented accommodation who may benefit from the companionship of a cat are being denied the opportunity -

APGOCATS recommends that Government works in collaboration with private and social housing providers and charities to explore ways of encouraging more cat-friendly tenancies - including a round table with landlord and tenant representatives.

- **Enable contact with cats where ownership is not possible.** There are circumstances where ownership of a cat is not always appropriate or possible, such as in some care home settings, some rented accommodation or for financial or lifestyle reasons. The needs of the person and the welfare needs of the cat both need to be taken into consideration.

APGOCATS recommends that cat welfare organisations and those working with those experiencing from or at risk of loneliness collaborate to signpost people to opportunities to interact with cats. This could include volunteering for a cat welfare charity or fostering a cat short term.

- **Provision of information and advice about responsible cat ownership and its benefits.** Information on the benefits of cat ownership is not always available to those experiencing from loneliness and who may potentially benefit, particularly at significant times of life change.

APGOCATS recommends that the wealth of information on cat care, adoption, lifetime costs of a pet etc. that is provided by animal organisations is widely shared by agencies and professionals that work with those experiencing or at risk of loneliness. Government could play a co-ordinating role in this process.

- **Cats to be incorporated into health assessments and personalised care plans.** Under the Care Act 2014⁸¹ individuals requiring care can receive support for their wellbeing. However, provision for the care of someone's pets is not currently considered in care and support plans.

APGOCATS recommends Government ensures that assessments and personalised care plans include consideration of any companion animals that form part of the individual's household. Where an individual's care can be more suitably provided in a care home or retirement complex, provided the accommodation is suitable for a cat and there are clear protocols in place, APGOCATS recommends that residents are allowed to have a cat. To achieve this, APGOCATS urges Government to work closely with care home providers, retirement complexes and animal welfare charities.

Cat companionship should be coupled with other interventions to tackle loneliness. The factors underlying loneliness are often multiple and complex, and cat ownership or interaction could be part of the solution, depending on individual circumstances.

⁸⁰ <http://www.socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/>

⁸¹ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/23/contents/enacted>

Appendices



Appendix A

APGOCATS officers, members and stakeholders

Officers

Sheryll Murray MP – Chair
Layla Moran MP - Treasurer
Lord Black of Brentwood - Vice Chair
Patricia Gibson MP - Vice Chair
Lord Goddard of Stockport - Vice Chair

Members

Sir David Amess MP
Sarah Champion MP
Rehman Chishti MP
Rosie Cooper MP
Martyn Day MP
Stephen Doughty MP
James Duddridge MP
Rosie Duffield MP
Bill Esterson MP
Baroness Gale
Andrew Gwynne MP
Luke Hall MP
Sir Greg Knight MP

Ian Liddell-Grainger MP
Caroline Lucas MP
Andrew Rosindell MP
Tommy Sheppard MP
Henry Smith MP
Mark Spencer MP
Mark Tami MP
Liz Twist MP
Neil Parish MP

Officers and Members during previous session

Maria Caulfield MP – Chair
Steve Reed MP - Co-Chair
David Drew MP – Secretary
Ross Thompson MP – Vice Chair
Victoria Prentis MP - Vice Chair
Kevin Foster MP
Sue Hayman MP
Emma Little-Pengelly MP
Angela Smith MP

Stakeholders

AdvoCATSeastmids
Battersea – Secretariat
Blue Cross – Secretariat
British Veterinary Association
Cats Protection – Secretariat
Governing Council of the Cat Fancy
International Cat Care
Mars Petcare
RSPCA
PDSA

Inquiry witnesses

Session 1

Ian Pendlington – Independent Age

Libby Webb – Age UK

Ellie White – Mind

Session 2

Harriet Edwards – Samaritans

Dr Sandra McCune VN, BA (Zoology), PhD
– WALTHAM Centre for Pet Nutrition

Prof. Christina Victor BA, M Phil, PhD, FAcSS, FFPH
– Brunel University London

Session 3

Robin Hewings – Campaign to End Loneliness

James McHugh – Peabody

Jake McKey – National Landlords Association (NLA)

Appendix B

Additional information on loneliness in the UK:

Loneliness and mental health: 30% of people experiencing loneliness in the UK said it led to them thinking about harming themselves. Loneliness is linked to a higher risk of depression and low self-esteem.

Loneliness and physical health: Research has determined five causal pathways between loneliness and ill health:

1. Reduced self-regulation due to low self-esteem and need for quick gratification leads to the adoption of harmful habits such as overeating, smoking and substance abuse directly affecting physical health.
2. Increased exposure to stress as the feeling that something is wrong caused by a lack of social contact leads to a physical response as if a person is being threatened.
3. Withdrawing from emotional connections with others decreases the opportunity for individuals to benefit from social support for their health.
4. Loneliness negatively affects the immune and cardiovascular systems.
5. Difficulties sleeping, which has the same effect on metabolic, neural and hormonal regulation as aging.



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