

Assessing the impact of Covid-19 on pets

By Georgina Mills

ALMOST a quarter of the UK's pets have been acquired in the past two years, equating to 5.4 million pets obtained since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the PDSA has found.

In its latest PDSA Animal Wellbeing (PAW) report, which was published on 30 June, the charity also notes that more than a third (36 per cent) of all owners are new, with no prior experience of owning their species of pet as an adult.

The report, which is based on information gathered from nearly 6000 dog, cat and rabbit owners, shows that first-time owners are more likely to purchase their pet from a private seller or breeder than more experienced owners. It also shows that the number of animals being acquired from UK rehoming centres has dropped since 2020.

There has been an increase in pets imported from abroad too, with some of these having undergone cosmetic surgeries that are illegal in the UK, such as ear cropping, tail docking or declawing. The proportion of imported dogs has risen from 4 per cent in 2020 to 6 per cent (equating to 640,000 dogs) in 2022 and of these, almost 4 per cent were imported for their cropped ears.

The PAW report estimates that there are 10.2 million dogs in the UK, 11.1 million cats and 1 million rabbits. Contrary to other reports that suggest the pet population has increased over the Covid-19 pandemic, the PDSA says the pet population has not risen as sharply as expected, although the estimated dog population and the proportion of adults owning dogs has increased.

The amount of time owners spend with their dogs seems to be returning to pre-pandemic levels, with the proportion of dogs left alone for an hour or more during a typical day increasing from 53 per cent in 2020 at the height of the pandemic, to 63 per cent in 2022, with 1.5 million dogs (15 per cent)

left alone for five or more hours.

The report indicates that dogs owned for less than two years show higher levels of separation-related behaviours (eg, scratching, destructive behaviour, prolonged barking, crying) compared to those owned for more than five years (14 per cent v 9 per cent). The PDSA says dogs bought during the pandemic could be struggling to adjust to longer periods of time away from their owners, as people spend less time at home.

Behavioural problems remain a concern, with 16 per cent of dogs – 1.6 million – showing signs of fear, growling or biting, and a further 13 per cent displaying these behaviours towards unfamiliar dogs. Forty-four per cent of cats are showing behaviours that may be indicative of stress, while 30 per cent of cats are afraid of travelling in the car and 25 per cent are afraid of the vet.

The PDSA found that 20 per cent of owners did no research before taking on a pet, and just 18 per cent investigated the costs associated with pet ownership. Just under a third of all dog (29 per cent), cat (31 per cent) and rabbit (28 per cent) owners also said they were worried about paying for unexpected vet bills if their pet fell ill or got injured.

PDSA director of veterinary services Richard Hooker said: 'There have been serious impacts on human wellbeing over the past two years, initially through the Covid-19 pandemic and now due to the cost of living crisis and other worldwide events. It is absolutely vital that during these challenging times, we continue to monitor and report on pet welfare, to ensure that we don't lose any progress we have made [and] to identify and track emerging concerns. [This] in turn will allow us to ensure PDSA's charitable funds



The report found that 15 per cent of dogs are left alone for five or more hours a day

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are used in the most effective way possible to help people in need and target the most pressing issues facing vulnerable pets in the UK.

'Sadly, many of the welfare concerns that have been highlighted by the PAW report over the last 12 years remain, demonstrating a worrying lack of owner understanding of the needs of their pets. Alongside this, we are seeing emerging issues such as behavioural problems potentially related to a lack of socialisation opportunities during the pandemic.

'Pet owners need support – it is essential that we continue to work towards understanding and overcoming the barriers owners may have to understanding and providing the care that pets require, especially at a time with so many competing voices. The veterinary professions and the wider animal welfare community have a vital role to play in using both empathy and evidence-based information to guide owners to help them improve their pet's wellbeing. PDSA will continue to play a key role in this work, through producing the PAW report to provide essential annual surveillance, and through our vital work helping people and pets in need across the UK.'

To view the full 2022 PAW report, visit www.pdsa.org.uk/paw-report-22 ●