

# The impact of COVID-19 on rescue shelters

Just as the rest of the world has had to adjust to the pressures and challenges of COVID-19, so have animal rescue centres. This article discusses the immediate effect of COVID-19 on rescue shelters in the UK.

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## The impact of closing shelters to the public

During the COVID-19 pandemic, RSPCA National Centres have been shut to members of the public. Only staff and volunteers have been on site to care for the animals and rehoming has mainly been done remotely. For many of the animals in our care this has been hugely beneficial. It has allowed staff to have more time to spend with the animals, and fewer distractions during training and rehabilitation. Staff report they feel closing the centres to visitors has reduced stress in both the cattery and the kennels, although many of the kennels have had no public access well before 2020 began. For all dogs, there has been a huge increase in the variation of out of kennel activities that staff can offer. More dogs are able to be in reception areas for rehabilitation, training, socialisation, habituation and resting. More dogs are able to be walked and exercised in the closed car parks, allowing the dogs new sights, sounds, scents and in some cases even textures to explore.

For a minority of animals, there have been some negatives. The effects of only seeing the same people on site has resulted in some animals becoming more wary of people not dressed in the staff uniform. Although this can be easily overcome, it is an added stressor for those animals when transitioning into a home environment. Some animals require a gradual introduction to their new adopters, across several sessions. Government guidelines have therefore, understandably, meant that these sessions have in some cases been delayed as a result of local or national lockdowns. This has resulted in longer stays in some cases, but this is thankfully the minority.

## Accessing veterinary and behavioural treatment during COVID-19

Similarly to the trending data from private prac-

tice vets (Singleton et al, 2020), veterinary treatment during national lockdowns was limited to essential visits only. We are very grateful to the private vets who work with our centres for their ongoing support during this very challenging period. For the animals in RSPCA care, we were very fortunate that this had little to no impact on the essential work that our centre vets carry out, although this has had some effect on routine operations such as neutering. This in turn limited rehoming options, with entire animals unable to be rehomed to homes with other entire animals.

Like many animal hospitals during the pandemic, the ability for the main animal caregivers to be present during the veterinary consultation varied. This undoubtedly has some effect on the animals ability to feel relaxed during those visits, but the centres were not alone in this challenge (Wayne and Rozanski, 2020).

Similarly to the challenges that vets have faced, behaviourists working with shelters have had to adjust the way in which they are assessing and supporting the animals. Thorough history forms, video footage and video calls have meant that in many cases, assessments and advice can be given safely at a distance. In some cases when the motivation for the behaviour is difficult to determine, a visit to see the animals in person has been needed and COVID-secure protocols have been put in place. The RSPCA recommends the use of ABTC registered clinical animal behaviourists, and many private clinical animal behaviourists are working in a similar capacity with private clients. The RSPCA have found this service to work well and are continuing to be able to support a large number of animals in this way.

## The impact on rehoming during COVID-19

After initial fears that companion animals may

spread COVID-19 (Csiszar et al, 2020; Parry, 2020), there were huge concerns that there would be an increase in animals being surrendered into our care. So far, staff have not reported to have seen this issue. This is likely at least partly as a result of the timely response the RSPCA and many other organisations took to provide reassurance that this would not be the case. Ratschen et al (2020) reported that most owners perceived their animals to be a source of considerable support during lockdowns, and that animal ownership compared with non-animal ownership was associated with smaller decreases in mental health. So it was no surprise when initial concerns were quickly followed by a puppy shortage and soaring prices of privately purchased companion animals, as those in lockdown found themselves with an abundance of time at home and seeking the social contact that pets can offer. This increased the number of puppy farmed puppies bought in the UK, with as many as one in four coming from puppy farms. The negative and lasting effects on behavioural and emotional health of dogs born in high-volume commercial breeding establishments is both documented (McMillan, 2017) and demonstrably clear to animal care professionals. Although some professionals are starting to see the fallout from impulse-purchased puppies during the pandemic, the effects are likely to continue for some time.

There have been many positives for animals in rescue facilities from the flexibility people currently have as a result of the pandemic. Across many of the RSPCA national sites, staff are reporting that there are many more people now in a position to foster or rehome animals. Flexibility in working patterns and the ability to work from home for huge numbers of the population has unearthed a wealth of suitable fosterers and adopters. These fosterers and adopters



RSPCA staff at Millbrook Animal Centre bathe one of a litter of Lurcher puppies found abandoned with a skin condition.

would have previously been ideal candidates for our animals, but commitments to out of home working patterns had previously been a barrier. The long-term welfare of the animals are assessed on an individual basis, and centres have worked hard to ensure that the animals will be able to cope if the owners were to return to work. The RSPCA, along with many other organisations, has information available on the website to assist owners with this transition for their pets.

Many animals that may previously have been overlooked are finding fantastic homes far quicker. Animals that are perhaps more nervous, or less interactive, are having more enquiries; they are no longer being overshadowed by their more social counterparts. When prospective adopters contact the centre about those animals with additional needs, staff are able to discuss specific requirements with them in more detail, and those animals are finding their perfect match far quicker than they may have previously. The number of dogs and cats returned has decreased dramatically, the numbers with half the number of dogs and half the number of cats being returned to our care post-adoption for 2020 when compared with previous years. This is a far greater reduction than the 22% we would have predicted to be in line with the fall in overall numbers of animals rehomed. Staff being able to discuss the animals needs with adopters at length before they have met the animal and have formed that emotional attachment, is likely to have played a significant role in ensuring those matches really are as perfect as possible.

During the pandemic, in order to adhere to

government guidance, the RSPCA needed to limit the calls they respond to, to only include animals most in need, most at risk of harm or neglect. This has reduced the numbers of dogs coming into RSPCA national centres via the RSPCA inspectorate by around one third when compared with previous years. The average length of stay before dogs were suitable for rehoming almost doubled for 2020 when compared with previous years.

The reasons for this are likely to be compounding. Since RSPCAs having to prioritise only the most urgent cases inspectors were responding to, the behavioural and health rehabilitation that those animals have needed has been extensive. Furthermore, gradual introductions of adopters to those animals has been far harder to accommodate with government guidance, and so many animals were needing to stay longer in order to ensure a successful rehoming. The average length of stay in RSPCA care once the animals were available for rehoming has stayed consistent with other years, showing that rehoming during COVID can be done safely and in a timely manner. Despite the number of dogs coming into RSPCA care via RSPCA inspectorate being considerably fewer than previous years, rehoming of dogs has only fallen by 22%, a huge positive showing just how many more adopters are coming forward during this period.

### The rehoming process

The RSPCA has had to change the way they are carrying out their rehoming process. Initial interest with animals, applications, finding the perfect match and home checks have all been completed remotely using video footage, pic-

tures and video calls wherever possible. For animals with specific additional needs, the use of video footage taken of the animal at specific moments has been well used to ensure that adopters are very clear with how to approach specific circumstances, for example, how to interact with a nervous cat or how to put the harness on a nervous dog. When staff are confident that a good match has been made, the animal is delivered directly to the home by experienced staff members trained specifically for this.

In the case of dogs, limitations of the process meant that adopters must have a secure outdoor area where the adopters are able to meet the animal, so the usual meet and greet can be carried out safely outdoors. For all animals, post-handover, the staff member must sit outside the property for a designated period in case the adopters need assistance with the animal. If all has gone well, the staff member returns to site. Contact information is given to the adopters so they are able to seek help with their new companion and ongoing support is offered to all, with specific points set for follow ups if everything is going well.

### The expected impact of COVID-19 for shelter animals

The long-term effects for animals in rescue centres are still unknown. Given the huge adjustments that have had to take place, it is clear that there is a lot to be learned from the experience. Although a full review is yet to take place, it is likely that some of the new operating procedures will become more permanent because of the benefits for both staff and animals on site.

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