

Dogs Trust response to the Petitions Committee inquiry into veterinary services in Wales.



These comments refer to the challenges of veterinary provision across the UK. It is important to distinguish the profession from the industry, and the professionals that we work with are highly dedicated individuals. To focus on the veterinary services in Wales, Dogs Trust recommends the following:

- To increase the number of veterinary professionals in Wales, Welsh Government should explore introducing additional bursaries and scholarships for students who wish to study and work in Wales after graduating. This would ensure that the course is accessible for all students, regardless of socio-economic background and may encourage graduates to remain in Wales.
- A differentiation should be made between the veterinary industry and the profession. Most vets working in practice will not be responsible for setting prices for veterinary services, nor will they benefit directly from increased costs.
- There is a need to highlight pathways for contextualised care. Within general practice, different approaches may be taken based on the balance of feasible treatment options, including consideration of the cost. Contextualised care refers to an approach to cases within the context of their surroundings, which includes input by the owner. The partnership between the client and the vet is focused on maximising the welfare of the patient and we would like to see more emphasis on this approach. A contextualised care approach lends itself to offering a client an appropriate range of treatment options where applicable. There is a fear amongst some professionals of being sued if they do not offer so-called 'gold standard'. Welfare should be the primary goal; 'just because we can does not mean to say that we should'.
- The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 is in urgent need of review and Welsh Government should urge the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to conduct a review as soon as possible. This would enable Registered Veterinary Nurses, an under-utilised skill, to take on a broader scope of procedures, to take account of paraprofessionals, and to give clear definitions for terms such as 'referral' and 'specialist'.

As described in the recommendations above, the Petitions Committee and Welsh Government should review the veterinary industry as a whole to improve the services offered to dog and pet owners in Wales.

Dogs Trust is a dog welfare charity, caring for around 13,000 dogs per year, we work closely with the veterinary services market to help manage the welfare of dogs in our care, as well as owned dogs who we support through our outreach schemes, post-adoption support funds and emergency fund. Our Emergency Fund can provide a financial contribution towards urgent unexpected treatment for dogs in the UK where their owners are unable to cover the whole cost. Owners are usually in receipt of means tested benefits but might also be on a low income or experiencing financial difficulty for another reason. Our Together Through Homelessness veterinary scheme funds the veterinary care for dogs whose owners are experiencing or at risk of any form of homelessness anywhere in the UK. We work in conjunction with over 150 vet practices across the country where the owners we support can access free vet care for their dogs.



We highly value the support and dedication of all veterinary professionals we engage with, without whose support, we would not be able to help the number of dogs we do. However, the profession has been under a huge amount of pressure over the past few years. The difficulties experienced during the pandemic led to many veterinary professionals moving to non-clinical roles or leaving the profession entirely. Dogs Trust has experienced significant challenges in recruitment for our clinical roles. This is also evidenced by many of our associated vet practices offering a reduced level of service; specifically, there has been a reduction in the number of visits to our centres, and on occasion there is a difficulty (or long waiting lists) to accommodate appointments and surgeries at practices. Some practices have had to withdraw their services completely due to a lack of capacity to support our needs. This can negatively impact welfare if this reduced capacity leads to a delay in instigating appropriate treatment. A significant rise in pet ownership during the pandemic alongside those leaving clinical roles has increased pressure on the profession.

According to the most recent Consumer Prices Inflation data from February 2024, vet bill inflation is over 3 times higher than headline inflation (13.25% vs. 3.4%)¹.

Increasing costs of caring for a dog contribute to the high numbers of enquiries to Dogs Trust from dog owners needing to give up their dog. As a part of this process our Customer Support Centre records the reason given. Concerningly, the proportion of those that spoke to our Customer Support Centre explicitly referring to financial issues as the reason that they are looking to relinquish their dog increased by 266% between 2021 and 2022. It further rose by 235% between 2022 and 2023, more than a tenfold increase on 2021. Additionally, between 2022 and 2023, we also saw a 512% increase in those mentioning being unable to afford veterinary expenses in their handover enquiry. To help keep dogs with their owners, between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024, Dogs Trust funded 1,880 veterinary treatments for 996 dogs across the UK, whose owners were experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

We have also seen an increase in telephone requests for financial help, either via our emergency fund, or requesting assistance in paying veterinary bills, with a 55.9% increase between 2022 and 2023. This also increased by 41% by email in the same period and as of Q1 2024 remains roughly double the numbers in 2022. This again reflects the ongoing financial challenges pet owners are facing.

The situation with veterinary services costs has had, and continues to have, a huge impact upon our ability to care for and rehome dogs, especially when combined with the increased overhead cost pressures as a result of the pandemic and the spike in energy prices. Costs have increased in all aspects of our lives, which continue to have a knock-on effect on our service delivery. As dog owners have experienced rapidly rising costs in dog food and veterinary bills, this has resulted in a rise in relinquishment enquiries, causing our rehoming centres to rapidly fill up. The cost of looking after increasing numbers of dogs, often with complex behavioural challenges or in need of costly veterinary treatment, is having a serious impact upon our ability to accept further dogs.

In summary, we do have concerns the about affordability and coverage of veterinary care, with more and more pet owners unable to access affordable or sufficient care for their pet. This is leading to welfare issues from delayed treatment, and greater pressure on an already stretched charitable sector.

¹ Dogs Trust internal research, based on CPI data and a method developed by Oxford Economics