

The Veterinary Capacity Project from Cats Protection

**A summary of findings for the
veterinary profession**



Introduction

Capacity within the veterinary profession has been significantly affected in recent years with poor staff retention and increases in patient numbers. The Veterinary Capacity Project from Cats Protection has examined the impact the veterinary capacity crisis is having on the interaction between vets and the charity sector. Anecdotally across Cats Protection there has been a significant difficulty in accessing veterinary services in recent years and concern that charity clients may be at a further disadvantage due to their request for discounts.

Cats Protection is aware that without the veterinary profession it cannot function. As a large UK-wide organisation, we wanted to understand whether there are changes we can make and support that we can give that can both facilitate more vets to work with charities but also support vets to remain in the workforce, particularly in general practitioner roles.

Project approach

The Veterinary Capacity Project from Cats Protection had two main components in the scoping stage:

- **internal stakeholder engagement** – discussions with employees and volunteers across the charity in roles directly impacted by the capacity issues
- **external stakeholder engagement** – namely with the veterinary profession. This included discussions with private practicing vets working directly with us, a survey to veterinary professionals and follow up focus groups of private practicing vets that completed the survey

The Veterinary Capacity survey

The Veterinary Capacity Project from Cats Protection survey was sent out to vets in November 2022 and ran until January 2023. The survey was promoted at the London Vet Show and through direct email to vets working with Cats Protection, was shared by other charity and corporate veterinary contacts, through Petplan's veterinary webpage and on social media. Following cleaning of the survey data, the responses of 236 UK-based veterinary professionals were collected.

The main aims of the Veterinary Capacity survey

- To understand if vets were still experiencing issues with capacity
- The main drivers for a reduction in capacity
- The impact on their general work
- The impact on their work with charities
- To understand their current experience and motivation for working with charities
- To understand how regularly they're practicing 'pragmatic medicine', if this has changed, and how confident vets feel
- To ask what support the charity sector may be able to offer veterinary professionals at this time

'Pragmatic' medicine

In this survey we used the term 'pragmatic' medicine to denote a practical, situational-based approach. Terms such as 'contextual care' or 'spectrum of care' have also been used to describe an approach to clinical practice that is not 'gold standard'.

We wanted to explore veterinary professionals' approach to 'pragmatic medicine' and whether there were perceived barriers to performing this in practice. This approach to medicine is a key part of shelter and charity work but is also becoming more relevant amidst the current cost-of-living crisis.

Following the survey, vet professionals were offered the opportunity to join focus groups to explore some of these themes in more detail. 27 vets were interviewed as part of the focus groups which included survey respondents who had volunteered their time and vets working directly with us that we engaged with. The focus groups took the form of either small group or one-to-one discussions and one larger group discussion online.

This report covers the key themes explored throughout the engagement and offers suggestions for opportunities and potential solutions.

Is there a capacity crisis in the veterinary profession?

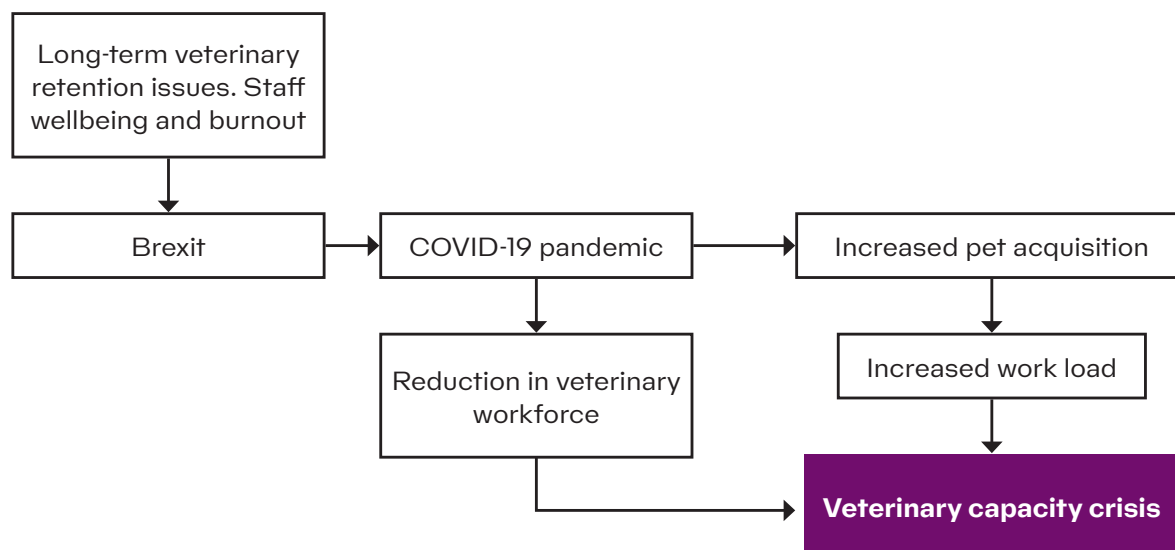
Concerns around capacity and retention in the veterinary profession are not new, however significant global events such as Brexit and COVID-19 have pushed the issue to crisis point. Significant work has been done in recent years to understand and address these capacity issues. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) formed a workforce summit in 2021⁽¹⁾ with key profession stakeholders and followed this up in 2023 with a series of workshops exploring some of the topics in more detail.

The RCVS and British Veterinary Association (BVA) have also worked to investigate the specific impact of Brexit on the veterinary profession, including a series of surveys with European vets working in the UK. The RCVS produced figures confirming that between January and May 2021, 155 vets entered the UK from overseas to work vs 533 in the same period in 2019⁽¹⁾.

The impact of COVID-19 was two-fold. Many vets experienced challenges to their work-life balance and burnout during that period or may have found themselves furloughed and reconsidering their career. A RCVS survey into the impact of the pandemic on the profession found that 65% of survey respondents felt conflict between their wellbeing and their professional roles⁽¹⁾. At the same time, with lockdowns and a new era of home working, we saw a huge surge in pet ownership. The organisation UK Pet Food reported around 3.2 million households acquiring a pet since the pandemic⁽²⁾, with Cats Protection CATS Report finding an increase of around 600,000 owned cats since 2020⁽⁶⁾.

We know that poor wellbeing and stress are common in veterinary surgeons. An RCVS survey in 2014 found almost 90% of vets found work stressful⁽⁵⁾. Further stressors include changes in client behaviour, a BVA survey⁽³⁾ found 66% of small animal vets felt intimidated by clients' language and behaviour following the pandemic and an RCVS Leaver survey found poor work-life balance and chronic stress among the top reasons to leave the profession⁽⁴⁾.

Key factors in the development of the veterinary capacity crisis



Of the 236 veterinary professionals surveyed, 26% reported that they were either not meeting demand in the last 12 months or anticipated that in the future they would not be able to meet demand. A further 26% reported uncertainty around their capacity to meet demand, although encouragingly 41% were able to meet demand and anticipated this to continue.

Top reasons for difficulties meeting demand

1. **Staff shortages:** 40% of respondents have, or have had, vacant posts unfilled by permanent or locum staff for over six months with vet surgeons being the most challenging role to fill.
2. **More pets registering.**
3. **More pets needing treatment.** 62% of respondents reported seeing more dogs, 53% reported seeing more cats and 27% reported seeing more pets in general.

Issues reported as a result of reduced capacity:

- **long waiting lists for routine appointments** (45% of respondents)
- **difficulty fitting in urgent or emergency work** (45% of respondents)
- **long waiting lists for elective surgeries** (42% of respondents)
- **difficulties registering new clients** (42% of respondents)

Vets were asked about access to other local practices for those clients unable to access their services due to capacity issues. 30% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that clients would be able to access timely services from alternative providers locally.

When surveyed as part of the Cats Protection CATS Report 2023, owners still reported difficulties, although these did seem to be improving. 30% of owners reported difficulty accessing a vet, although this has dropped compared to last year (37%). Interestingly owners in urban areas seem more affected (44% experiencing difficulty accessing a vet) and feedback from veterinary focus groups corroborates this with one attendee reporting that 'Greater London is operating on a locum basis'.

Focus group attendees also talked about the current lack of experience within the profession and challenges recruiting vets that were not new graduates. The knock-on effect is that new graduate vets do not have enough support for case management and personal development and this then puts further pressure on those experienced vets remaining in practice.

How is this crisis affecting charities?

80% of survey respondents reported to be doing some charity work, although a degree of bias towards Cats Protection and the charity sector in general was seen throughout this survey, so it's unlikely this reflects the true state of affairs across the profession.

Respondents were asked about their approach to charity work:

- 62% of respondents reported no difference, that they were seeing charity clients as normal
- 31% of respondents were still seeing cases but had to delay them
- 13% had reduced the amount they were doing

In a broader question about changes in response to the capacity crisis 9% reported that they had been unable to carry out any charity work. Further, 13% reported that they were either reducing or stopping the neutering that they did for charities.

Stakeholder engagement within Cats Protection backs up these findings, with employees and volunteers reporting a two/three-week delay in accessing veterinary services, and a reduction in the actual veterinary services offered – certain surgeries or dental procedures may no longer be available.

Teams reported challenges accessing neutering and more general care for clients taking on cats, with many vets closing books to new clients. It was reported that emergency vets were being used more frequently and earlier in the day, with subsequent increasing costs for the charity. Our teams reported more complex cases regularly coming into care, and as such the work asked of vets supporting our teams may be more intensive. Employees and volunteers repeatedly reported that their vets seemed burnt out and very stressed.

It is apparent that capacity issues are still present in the veterinary profession, and at times these issues may be disproportionately affecting charity clients. This report offers solutions and opportunities for the charity sector to work with the vet profession and hopes to reduce some of these difficulties.

Pragmatic medicine

As part of the survey, we asked veterinary professionals about their experience and confidence in the practice of 'pragmatic medicine', what the key perceived barriers are and whether vets have changed how often they approach cases pragmatically in the last 12 months (a point that is relevant to both cost-of-living changes and veterinary capacity issues). There was good awareness of pragmatic medicine, only 30% of vets surveyed were either not at all aware or only slightly aware of the concept of pragmatic medicine and further only 5% had little or no confidence when applying pragmatic medicine.

"Increasing costs of drugs and services with the cost-of-living crisis, some people do not have as much money to spend, they may have had to cancel insurance or have inappropriate insurance which does not cover everything." Survey respondent

Typically, vets reported they use pragmatic medicine for about half of the cases they see, although just 12% of vets reported that they use pragmatic medicine 100% of the time.

Changes to frequency of pragmatic medicine practice

Nearly half (46%) of those surveyed reported that they were taking pragmatic approaches to more cases. Thematic analysis on this question points largely to cost-of-living changes and owners unable to afford expensive treatments. 86% (36/42) of respondents who detailed why they had increased their levels of pragmatic medicine said it was due to monetary issues, with owners facing financial constraints due to rising costs of living, at the same time as the costs of veterinary medicine and equipment are increasing. 14% of respondents (6/42) mentioned that fewer pets have insurance, also limiting the budget owners have to spend on veterinary care.

Barriers to practicing pragmatic medicine and improving confidence in this area

The top barriers for practicing pragmatic medicine that came up in the Veterinary Capacity survey were:

Fear of litigation: We explored fear of litigation as a barrier to practicing of pragmatic medicine with focus group attendees. One attendee had had direct experience of a Royal College complaint due to taking a pragmatic approach to a case (that the owner had fully consented to). While their experience with the Royal College was very positive and the complaint was completely rejected it was an extremely stressful experience and did leave the attendee overthinking cases following the experience. More general discussion was had in some groups about the Royal College complaint process and that vets have little idea what happens as part of this process, so being made more aware of this (through for example university or new graduate education) might help to debunk some of that fear. Comments were also made about the timelines for the complaint process significantly adding to stress levels and potentially the timings of those communications (one attendee referred to emails being sent out on a Friday afternoon so vets left ruminating on them over their weekends). One vet questioned whether involving junior vets in complaint case handling would be helpful to them, as some of the reassurance from, for example the Veterinary Defence Society, might not filter down to the vet involved. The fear is often bigger than the reality, so more open conversations about complaints, at practice and professional level would be helpful, and the “Royal College’s image being more human” was suggested by one focus group attendee to help alleviate some of those fears.

Concerns vets are not doing the right thing by their patient: We talked to focus groups about cases which they found more challenging to personally take that pragmatic approach. Vets cited younger animals, and the management of orthopaedic cases such as fractures. Decisions around, for example, amputation vs fixing a leg, were quite challenging for some attendees. Vets also reported feeling conflict over the approach to feline infectious peritonitis (FIP) cases with new, expensive but curative treatments available, and on the management of cases where antibiotics were required and vets had to make a decision whether to culture or not.

“Young vets are scared to death of litigation.”
Focus group attendee

Conversely, in a shelter setting one vet explained questioning rationale around expensive treatments for an individual cat versus interventions that can be made that positively impact a much larger population; another spoke of the reality of a pet being relinquished into care as the owner was reported to not be able to afford 'gold standard' but where the charity clinic was then able to treat with simple medications once the cat was in care.

Pressure from colleagues/practice culture: We talked to vets in the focus groups about the impact that practice and, more broadly, professional culture was having. A key point was the difference between perceived and actual pressure from colleagues, vets identified a significant 'fear of getting it wrong' and 'struggle with not being perfect' that is innate within many vets and was particularly identified in new graduate vets. While it's unlikely that actual pressure matches up to many vets' perceptions, vets did talk of situations where they perhaps receive unhelpful feedback which led to further self-doubt, and experiences working in certain clinics where finances were a big driver for vet behaviour and decision making. The survey asked respondents what would increase their confidence applying pragmatic medicine and one response was that "We are a 'gold standard' high-tech practice so less perceived judgement from colleagues would be great."

A number of vets felt it was new graduates that were often pushing this 'gold standard' approach. One vet spoke of how limited prior life experience and limited exposure to poverty in many new graduate vets could reduce understanding of the challenges their clients are facing and subsequently struggle to see the need to offer an alternative approach. Recruitment of vets from more diverse backgrounds may improve compassion for clients with limited financial resources and offer vets a more flexible, relational mindset to managing these cases. Most vets pointed to university education and the focus on referral medicine that students receive, with vets experiencing 'spinal surgeries more than routine procedures' and lacking the 'skill of doing things with limited information'. One vet also considered social media groups such as Facebook discussion forums to feed into this, with vets passing comment on how others have handled cases with only a brief overview of the situation.

Improving confidence in applying pragmatic medicine

It is clear from survey results and conversations with vets that a need for pragmatic, contextual approach to cases is common place in practice, but it's also evident that barriers exist to taking this route. Fear of judgement appears to sit behind so many of these individual barriers, and the profession needs to consider this in a holistic manner. Being faced regularly with situations where, as one focus group attendee described, 'there is no right answer', without the empowerment to take a more flexible approach, is ultimately going to be stressful and may be in part contributing to wellbeing concerns in the profession.

Survey respondents and focus group attendees were asked their opinion on how we might tackle these issues, and further CPD, information and understanding was popular in both groups (17 out of 37 respondents suggested this in the survey making it the top solution to increasing confidence – one respondent asked for "better understanding of the definition of pragmatic medicine"). This teaching could look like, for example, webinars and online learning around pragmatic medicine and its uses. Many of the focus group attendees talked about the importance of support for those new graduate vets in practice and one of the challenges being a significant absence of experienced vets in clinics.

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| Top suggestions for increasing confidence in pragmatic medicine (Veterinary Capacity survey) |
| CPD/information/understanding (17 of 37 respondents) |
| Owners having a better understanding of pragmatic medicine, including potential pitfalls (8 of 37 respondents) |
| Reduced judgement within the veterinary profession/improved practice culture, including support from peers (7 of 37 respondents) |
| Clearer guidance from clients on financial issues (4 of 37 respondents) |
| More research/case studies providing information on outcomes (3 of 37 respondents) |
| More practice (3 of 37 respondents) |
| More consult time (2 of 37 respondents) |

Often with pragmatic medicine, experience was considered to be as valuable as education and this is often what held new grad vets back from taking that approach, and ‘more practice’ with a pragmatic approach came up with survey respondents too.

The communication skills required to have clear, non-judgemental conversations with owners about finances also came up within the focus groups and is echoed in comments from the survey where vets explain they weren’t aware of clients ‘limitations and expectations’ with some vets asking for ‘more time in consults to be able to discuss options and come up with appropriate treatment plans’. Similarly eight out of 37 of the responders suggested that if owners had a better understanding of pragmatic medicine, including potential pitfalls, that vets would feel more confident practicing it, so looking at how vets can have these discussions effectively in the time that they have with clients would be helpful. Cats Protection is joining forces with Veterinary Defence Society (VDS) Training to produce a webinar that offers support around contextual decision making, financial discussions and aims to offer reassurance for vets that they will be supported when taking this approach.

When it comes to the feelings of pressure and judgement, one focus group member talked about receiving difficult feedback from a vet and how it made her feel. Support for vets around coaching and mentoring and giving constructive feedback might also be beneficial.

Having more evidence in the form of research also came up regularly in focus groups and was mentioned within the survey. Vets talked about the challenges they face with data sheets and how strict they can be compared to the reality of what many owners are able to afford. Clear communication around options and risks and support from groups such as the VDS would be useful, but vets suggested it would be helpful to have ‘evidence around actual risk’. Data sheets will often be behind the curve as it takes time and money to change the guidance on them, even if the pharmaceutical companies have data that supports safety (for example guidance that was given around off licence vaccination protocols during COVID-19).

Finally focus group attendees talked a lot about the role of universities. Ensuring vets have thorough exposure to experiences where a pragmatic approach might need to be taken and more training on those financial conversations was discussed frequently. The admissions process needed to ensure and encourage resilience in the cohort of vets that are taken on. Perfectionism, self-doubt and perceived judgement came up regularly throughout conversations with vets – do we need to be working harder with students and qualified vets to acknowledge these wellbeing challenges and help vets create an individual toolkit to deal with that which moves away from defensive medicine? One vet talked about the cost of going to vet school (not just the fees but also the inability to work part-time after the fourth year, the cost of getting to EMS placements etc.) and how this actively dissuades vets from poorer backgrounds to attend vet school, which culminates in a profession lacking in diversity and as such reduced understanding of the diversity of the clients they are then supporting.

Work with animal welfare charities

80% of those surveyed working in non-charity specific practice are involved in some form of charity work for a broad variety of different charities. The top charities respondents reported to be working with included Cats Protection, the RSPCA and independent rescues. This likely reflects a degree of bias with the audience that received the survey towards working with the charity sector and in particular Cats Protection. For most surveyed this hasn't changed in the last 12 months (only six respondents reported to have previously done work that they no longer do).

Encouragingly, 88% of respondents felt that animal welfare charities were very important to animal welfare, with a slight difference between vet nurses and vets (89% vs 84% respectively).

| Top motivators for working with/volunteering for an animal welfare charity (Vet Capacity survey) |
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| Feeling of giving back to society |
| Improved sense of purpose |
| Variety of clinical cases seen |

Vet motivation – what might get vets on board with working with charities?

Survey respondents were asked 'Are you happy with the amount of charity work you or your practice are involved in?' and of the 226 respondents 41% said that they would like to be doing more – only 6% wanted to do less and the remainder were happy with the amount they were doing. So it appears, certainly from survey respondents, there is an appetite to do charity work and for many for this to increase. Top motivators for working with the charity sector are listed above, and we spoke to vets in focus groups about potential barriers to vets working with charities, and how the charity sector could improve access for those vets that do want to support them. We also explored some of these areas with internal stakeholders. There were a few key themes that arose.

Finances

Our internal stakeholders referenced increasing vet costs as an impact of the veterinary capacity issues and this was confirmed through conversations had with vets – vets spoke about costs rising for them and a struggle to continue to justify significant discounts for charities, and if those significant discounts were offered, then the time that could be spent with those cases would need to be offset with cases that would bring in money to keep the clinic afloat. Some vets spoke of the challenges of offering a discount to a charity but not to a struggling private client, particularly in the face of the cost-of-living crisis. Vets reported that if they were better paid by charities access would likely improve. The increase in pay for the new Cats Protection subsidised neutering voucher was cited as a real positive by some vets.

The issue around debt also came up. If bills aren't paid immediately (and it is the norm for charities to pay on a monthly basis) then this will show up as debt for a practice on their accounts – particularly if there is any delay in paying this invoice. This can have a significant impact on cash flow for smaller independent practices who may simply not be in a position to take on this debt and debt levels are considered a key performance indicator (KPI) for many corporate groups – clinical directors will be assessed and paid based on their average practice debt. Looking at ways we can simplify the payment process and if possible, speed this up, may be useful and there may be a role for corporate groups to reduce penalising clinics where charity work is taking place. One vet talked of regularly being in £4-5k of debt each month due to work done with charities.

Vet-charity relationships

Vets spoke about being put off working with charities due to challenges with communications and an in-balance between expectation and what vets can realistically do. Some vets spoke of the value of really positive relationships – strong teamwork was part of what made them love working with the charity. Key factors for strong vet-charity relationships were:

- trust – both in the vets and the charity team they are working for
- regular communication – the importance of face-face meetings to discuss issues
- flexibility – for charities as well. If a vet has a cancellation, might the local charity be able to fill that space?

- organisation and advanced planning – particularly for vets offering pro-bono work for charities
- realistic expectations – vets are struggling, and teams need to be supportive of that

Support from corporates

Vets spoke about the importance of a supportive practice management team and encouragement from the organisation they worked for to partake in charity work, with many saying it was seen as a positive by their employer. Securing corporate discounts and having local control to reduce these further if necessary was cited as a real positive by vets, although internal stakeholders did bring up the lack of knowledge some vets had about charity discounts they had available to them – so improved communication of these would be useful.

Vets discussed the idea of corporate charity days that would help improve their understanding of the charity sector and might support, for example, neutering programmes. A few corporates offer these already and they were seen to be most helpful if they were considered as part of the employer’s rota (versus something done in spare time and paid for). Charities could link into these by offering a directory of volunteering opportunities that employers could be involved in. Vets also talked about linking charity work in with new graduate schemes, in particular linking neutering and surgical support that new graduates require. It was acknowledged that this would be something that would need experienced vet support too but is already taking place with some of the corporates and local charities.

Value of charity case involvement

Many vets talked of the real value of charity work for personal development and experience. Vets working with local Cats Protection centres talked of recent graduates benefitting from high volume neutering, good clinical variety and opportunities to learn to take that pragmatic approach. Through work with charities, vets talked of the ability to work on cases that now may be referred, particularly certain surgeries. There is often a feel-good factor that feeds into involvement in charity work – one vet talked of the clinic team morale boost that accompanied the decision to support a local branch of Street Vet, and another vet talked about their clinic’s care fund preventing certain financial euthanasia decisions, that can particularly impact vet wellbeing when there is a simple solution and the patient is young and healthy. Talking about these interesting and positive case studies more widely may help to promote the work that charities do.

Vet recognition

When we talked to vets about whether further recognition was required, they often said that the enjoyment in the work they did with charities was enough – particularly if the relationship was positive. Vets talked of already sharing positive cases on each other’s social media channels and this being helpful for both parties, although there is the need to check in with the individual practice as to what they would find helpful – some vets voiced concerns that clients may begrudge them if they struggled to get appointments and the practice were seen to spend a lot of time doing charity work. Internal teams suggested recognition could be very localised – from a thank you with cakes or cards to updates on numbers of cats they’ve helped and positive outcomes. Internal teams talked about broader recognition such as nominating vets for awards – be they existing awards such as the Petplan awards or new awards, such as Vet of the Year at Cats Protection National Cat Awards. They also discussed a banner or poster that vets could use to display the fact that the vet clinic supports a charity.

“Clients blame vet prices, we think lockdown puppies and kittens are leading to behavioural issues and owners can’t afford referrals for behaviourists or are figuring out that they cannot afford the animals.” Survey respondent

Referral to charities

As part of the survey, we wanted to understand how often vets are having to refer to charities, has this changed, why and what vets' and clients' experience of this was. There was a broad spread in terms of frequency of charity referral but monthly was the most common frequency that practices were referring cases to charities.

Most popular reasons for charity referral

- Owners being unable to afford to treat their animal when the animal is ill
- Owners not being able to afford routine preventative healthcare

Cost of living and COVID-19 impacting charity referral

42% of respondents said they were referring more to charities over the last 12 months. 92% of respondents referring cases to charities more frequently mentioned owner's financial reasons – specifically that owners had less money available for veterinary treatment. This was often attributed to the cost-of-living crisis and a reduction in numbers of owners with insurance.

An increase in pet ownership was detailed by 25% of respondents, with nearly half of those specifying 'lockdown pets' were contributing to the increase in charity referral.

Are charities meeting expectations?

Responses to whether expectations were met by charities were varied, although no respondents answered 'never' for this question.

For respondents who said their expectations were met by charities only sometimes or seldom, this seemed to be because responses from charities were unpredictable. This was reported to stem from differences between charities (both national and local), issues with postcode restrictions and differences in services provided for different species. Many respondents acknowledged that this is likely to be due to charities facing financial restrictions themselves.

Charity referral: Feedback from clients

Where respondents gave details on feedback received from clients, 35% (49/140) indicated feedback was predominantly positive and that owners were grateful to receive help (20/48).

However, 16% (23/140) reported feedback was often negative, with owners being disappointed in the level of help they received or unable to access help at all in some instances (17/23). Some respondents did note that they recognised the pressures charities are facing.

13% (18/140) reported mixed feedback, dependant on the level of help that was available and the initial expectation of help held by the owners.

36% (50/140) of respondents reported that they receive little to no feedback from owners once cases have been referred.

"It is very difficult to refer to a charity hospital as they have tightened their criteria, or do not have facilities locally. Headquarters of national charities have small and insufficient amounts that they will contribute towards treatment, so it usually ends up being the local branches who have to fund further treatment costs at a time when they are already struggling. It is very difficult to find a local branch who will take a stray, abandoned animals or pets that members of the public can no longer keep (due to both financial reasons and others, eg landlord will not allow, does not have time to look after pet due to family, health issues or working commitments) as they don't have room." Survey respondent

"It is very variable. Some are very grateful eg for a lump removal or a fracture repair. Some are very disappointed that they don't get the investigations or treatment that had previously been discussed. The most common outcome is that they don't qualify after almoning and that is very disappointing for them."

"Some are grateful. Some feel that it's their right to get gold star treatment without any sort of payment." Survey respondents

Support that charities can offer the vet profession at this time

We asked vets what further support the charity sector might be able to give the vet profession at this time with 177 of 236 respondents providing suggestions.

Support with finances

79 of those 177 respondents mentioned financial assistance. This was suggested in different forms:

- covering vet costs for owners unable to afford treatment or providing vouchers for specific procedures such as neutering (13/79)
- help for emergency treatment
- other suggestions included covering diagnostic costs, and food and boarding fees while undergoing veterinary care
- 9/79 respondents mentioned the need for financial assistance to be managed effectively, to ensure limited resources could be used as productively as possible

We talked further to focus group attendees about the idea of further veterinary support with finances and how this could work. Attendees often mentioned the positive impact of schemes like the Cats Protection subsidised neutering vouchers, but also mentioned challenges with accessing current subsidised financial support for more reactive veterinary services (charity clinics for example). Often owners were eligible but positioned in the wrong postcode or were eligible but could not access transport to get there. Vets talked about access to support that would enable them to provide care in their local clinic being very useful, either a budget for use for cases, or a selection of medications provided by a charity for use in appropriate cases. But vets did also reflect on the difficulty they would have providing this care when they are already struggling with capacity, and so the idea of charity-run clinics, or non-profit co-ownership clinics set up with charities was also mentioned. Some put forward the need for an 'NHS for pets', and that determining who received this support was challenging – often it was in their experience with the 'working poor' who struggled the most but were eligible for the least current support. A holistic approach with support of groups like food banks to ensure owners can access pet care was also mentioned.

If vets didn't have access to charity support, they spoke of taking a contextual approach to cases and using external payment plans such as Klarna. Another vet spoke of the need to 'remove the stigma around economic euthanasia' for those owners that really can't afford that care.

Owner education

This was cited by 40/177 respondents. Topics typically included:

- pet care and welfare
- the realistic costs of pet ownership
- the importance of veterinary care and procedures such as neutering

“Financial support given to client who want to keep care within private practice. Sadly our local charity clinic has reduced their opening hours, and we have to pick up the cases when they are closed, but due to overheads to not have the capacity to offer discount, therefore putting clients that have no option but to visit us in a financially difficult situation.”

“Help for owners who are struggling to keep their pets. Sometimes I feel that signing over their pets is the wrong thing to do when they just need a little extra help in difficult times. This means the owners get to keep their pets and the charity does not need to rehome or care for the animal. Seems a win win situation.”
Survey respondents

When discussing the financial support for owners, focus group attendees often cited a proactive approach being required which ties in with owner understanding and education about the cost and realities of pet ownership. Vets cited the often 'impulse' approach to animal purchases which led to unrealistic owner expectations around cost but were also clear that vet fees and other costs have risen dramatically, so for an owner whose last pet was several years ago, they may not be prepared. Better information about the costs if things go wrong, what conditions are common and their cost, and the importance of regular visits to the vet came up in discussions. One vet cited the perception that dogs should be prioritised over cats for vet visits and preventative care that she saw in some of her client's behaviour ('it's only a cat').

Social media

Vets felt that advertising and social media may play a role in improving owner understanding – one vet spoke of the want to 'fit in' that social media encourages, and so making it desirable to be an owner who takes their pets to the vet may help some owners change their ways. Celebrity vets could play a part in this along with other celebrity influencers. Cats Protection is currently running a campaign specifically for new owners, or those thinking of getting a pet, to encourage them to be well prepared ahead of their new arrival.

Insurance

Many vets talked of the importance of promoting insurance and how even a very basic insurance policy can mean something can be done in an emergency situation. But education around what an insurance policy means and how much cover they're likely to need to help their pet also came up as an important area to further educate owners.

Charity support

Along with promoting information on pet costs, preventative health care and insurance through social media and other channels, focus groups talked of the benefit of providing information at the time of adoption, through leaflets etc. Internal stakeholders discussed the idea of charities producing a document that details likely costs that could be given to owners at the time of adoption. It was also discussed that owners sometimes expect costs to be more (for example expecting to pay £100 for microchipping) and so this may also help to reduce some concern, enable budgeting, and encourage simple preventative health measures.

Support with stray cats

19 of the 176 respondents talked about support with strays being a way that the charity sector can support the profession. Vets in the focus group that worked with Cats Protection mentioned the support that the local branch gave in helping with those cats. If stray cats come in, focus group attendees talked of turning to the charity that they have local relationships with to help. Vets mentioned that often if a cat is healthy and well and unchipped, they will recommend they are returned to the site where they were found, but having further guidance around the handling of unchipped (and microchipped) strays from organisations such as Cats Protection would be useful – particularly if members of the public are insisting that the cat stays in the clinic until an owner is found.

"I'd like to see more action to tackle deceit from insurance companies. I feel particularly sorry for people who feel they have taken out comprehensive insurance policies, only to find out the limits are actually very low, or there are a large number of caps or exclusions." Focus group attendee

Internal stakeholders reported that branches and centres will help where possible, but that capacity will often be limited their end. They felt that vets' expectations around what could and couldn't be done really varied and that ensuring all vets in the UK had a copy of local charities' stray policies would be useful.

Better collaboration with other charities around capacity to support stray cats came up regularly with internal stakeholders and was also mentioned by respondents in the capacity survey. There may be a role for a volunteer to support local vet practices with strays – co-ordinating with other local charities to help move that cat into a rescue space as soon as possible. Cats Protection is exploring other ways it can support vets around handling stray cats and hopes that compulsory microchipping, due to come into place in June 2024, will reduce some of these challenges.

Funding of sick and injured stray cats

We asked vets how they would fund the treatment of sick or injured stray cats. Most respondents (48%) rely on charity assistance, and talking with focus group attendees, this may be in the form of the RSPCA's Initial Emergency Treatment fund or support from local charity branches such as Cats Protection. 40% of respondents said funding would come from practice funds, 7% using a fund from client donations and 6% from another source. Vets in the focus groups discussed the challenges in terms of the treatment of sick or injured stray cats, with pain relief and euthanasia sometimes being the only option open to them which could result in significant moral dilemma. It is hoped that compulsory microchipping will reduce the incidence of unchipped stray cats.

“We have a lot of strays – particularly cats, who end up spending a lot of time in our small kennel spaces as charities advise they cannot collect them. Unsure if charities are just overrun with cases and don't have space? Is there a big foster bank which can look after animals? Or catteries who are willing to take on cases for example?” Survey respondent

Other forms of assistance for the vet profession

The other top answers included:

- **support vet education** ⁽¹⁵⁾ – ‘Advice on how to handle cases involving neglect and having euthanasia discussions’ and ‘More advice on difficult cases with financial constraints’
- **better signposting to services** ⁽⁵⁾ – ‘Increase public awareness of help that charities can offer such as neutering vouchers’
- **clearer guidelines from charities** ⁽⁵⁾ – ‘More clear guidelines for what help is available, when and where and for who’
- **getting reasonable payment/comms from charities** ⁽⁴⁾ – ‘Easy access to getting reference numbers, amount available to spend per case’
- **services available for more people** ⁽⁴⁾ – Geographical bias, ‘Cover wider areas – eg my town is out with the cover for PDSA, so clients have nowhere else to go’
- **raising awareness of the difficulties vets facing – support the profession** ⁽²⁾ – ‘Supporting vet practices and avoiding vet bashing on social media especially the smaller charities’
- **out of hours (OOH) cover** ⁽²⁾ – ‘Advice line open over the weekend or late evenings’

Conclusion

The landscape for both veterinary and charity sectors is challenging at the moment, with capacity issues in the veterinary profession still relevant and the backdrop of the cost-of-living crisis. Our work suggests that charities may be further disadvantaged by these difficulties compared to private clients, but the value the charity sector offers to improving animal welfare is still clear to vets. This report offers lots of opportunities to support on some of these challenges and aims to improve collaboration between sectors.

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cats.org.uk

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