Pet owner survey method
As with previous PAW Reports, to ensure accurate, robust results, we’ve worked with YouGov to conduct public research using their panel methodology. In using this method, we survey pet owners from the general public who are representative of the entire UK population. The total sample size was 4639 cat, dog and rabbit owners aged 18 years + who live in the UK. Fieldwork was undertaken between 9th and 19th January 2018. The survey was conducted online and statistically analysed by YouGov.

Professional survey methods
This year we’ve surveyed the veterinary profession on a variety of topics in two ways: through our PDSA professional survey, and through BVA and BVNA’s Voice of the Profession surveys (see box opposite). Our PDSA professional survey was carried out online to an open sample of 549 veterinary professionals. Fieldwork was undertaken between 8th January and 5th February 2018 and analysed by YouGov. Data from the PDSA professional survey is embodied in the text of the report, whereas data from the BVA and BVNA surveys is shown separately in blue boxes with a stethoscope icon as shown opposite.

Data analysis
Figures from the pet owner survey were weighted to be representative of the population by pet species (cat, dog or rabbit owners) and the owner’s age, gender and region. Figures from the other surveys were not weighted. Percentages throughout the report are rounded to the nearest whole number. All differences between figures have been validated by YouGov and are statistically significant unless stated otherwise. When referring to ‘owners’, this means cat, dog and rabbit owners, not the owners of all types of pets.

When calculating approximate numbers of the population, we’ve taken the population figure from page 8, multiplied it by the percentage and rounded to two significant figures. For example: 57% of cats live alone. This equates to (11,100,000 cat pop figure) x 0.57 = 6,327,000 cats, which when rounded is 6.3 million.

The total sample size was 4639 cat, dog and rabbit owners aged 18+ years who live in the UK.
Pre-purchase

Taking on a new pet is undoubtedly a significant and exciting time in people’s lives. Despite this, 5.2 million pet owners (24%) did no research at all before taking on their pet.

We asked pet owners ...
Which, if any, of the following did you do before you chose your pet?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dog owners</th>
<th>Cat owners</th>
<th>Rabbit owners</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>36% Looked on the internet</td>
<td>31% Have previous experience of cat ownership</td>
<td>33% Have previous experience of dog ownership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20% Took advice from friends/family</td>
<td>18% Nothing – I didn’t do anything</td>
<td>16% Looked on the internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18% Nothing – I didn’t do anything</td>
<td>31% Nothing – I didn’t do anything</td>
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Lack of research before getting a pet will have an impact on their future wellbeing, as owners may be unaware of how to provide for their chosen pet’s needs. With so few potential pet owners (5%) turning to vets and vet nurses for advice, this again highlights the need for us as professionals to reach out and offer help with pre-purchase research and decisions.

It’s crucial that we look at ways to engage with anyone thinking of getting a pet to help them make an informed decision about which pet may best suit their lifestyle. For so many of life’s big decisions, people will spend time planning and researching; where to go on holiday, what car to drive or where to live. It’s vital that we elevate the importance of pre-purchase research before getting a pet as one of life’s important decisions to be given the priority it needs.

15% of dog owners found their pet via an advert on a classified advertising website

Possible links between pre-purchase research and knowledge of the 5 Welfare Needs

Owners who don’t feel informed about all of the 5 Welfare Needs are more likely to do nothing before purchasing their pet (28%), compared to owners who feel informed or very informed (23%) about all of the 5 Welfare Needs.

When compared to owners who feel informed about all 5 Welfare Needs, owners who don’t feel informed about all of the 5 Welfare Needs are less likely to do the following before taking their pet home:
- See them with their mum (34% compared to 40%)
- See them with their dad (11% compared to 14%)
- Check breeder would complete some form of contract (9% compared to 13%)

‘To encourage more people to attend pre-purchase consultations we should consider the science of human behaviour change. There is evidence to show that communication based in confrontation doesn’t work, so trying to change people’s minds away from buying a certain breed through facts that might be perceived as confrontation is unlikely to be successful. Communication based on empathy and values is a much better predictor of behaviour change. Framing the message positively will be key – for example, that the most modern, caring owners seek pre-purchase advice.’

Suzanne Rogers BSc(Hons) CHBC
(Human Behaviour Change for Animals CIC)

BVA and BVNA surveys

Pre-purchase information offered to prospective pet owners by practices:
- 71% offer advice as part of routine consultations
- 29% offer advice through practice social media
- 27% offer printed materials (e.g. practice leaflets and newsletters)
- 16% provide links to websites on how to choose the right pet
- 13% offer free dedicated pre-purchase clinics/appointments
- 10% have part of the practice website dedicated to pre-purchase advice
- 4% use e-newsletters
- 2% offer paid-for dedicated pre-purchase clinics/appointments
- 1% offer videos/DVDs in the practice

“Lack of pre-purchase research will have an impact on the future wellbeing of the pet.”

We must engage with potential pet owners early and support handovers.

Proactive engagement is key to changing behaviour and ensuring a happy pet.

Suzanne Rogers BSc(Hons) CHBC
(Human Behaviour Change for Animals CIC)
Many pet owners get their pet from reputable sources such as rescue or rehoming centres or approved breeders, however many would still consider getting their pet from unsuitable places.

For example, 16% would consider getting a pet from a puppy farm and 21% said they’d consider buying from a seller who approached them.

Broken down by species, where people get their pets from has stayed fairly consistent with previous PAW Reports.

As final preparation before bringing their new pet home, what actions, if any, did owners take?

76% of dog owners who got their pet from a breeder or private seller, saw their pet with his/her mum before taking their dog home. Whilst it’s encouraging that the majority of owners are taking this important step, this is a figure that should be higher, highlighting the need to educate owners further in this area.

46% of dog owners who got their pet from one of these sources visited their pet on more than one occasion, 39% made sure the breeder was a member of an assured breeder scheme, 32% checked that the breeder would complete some form of contract (e.g. Puppy Contract), 33% saw their pet with his/her dad and for 3% the breeder or seller visited their home to assess it. 17% of dog owners did none of these – significantly higher than dog or cat owners. These figures reflect the different nature of purchasing from pet shops or garden centres, which tends to be more spontaneous.

23% of rabbit owners visited their pet on more than one occasion, and 19% saw him/her with their mum – much lower than for dog or cat owners. 8% saw him/her with their dad. Just 6% state that the breeder, seller or rehoming charity visited their home to assess it, and 5% checked that the breeder or seller would complete some form of signed contract of sale. 46% of rabbit owners did none of these – significantly higher than dog or cat owners. These figures reflect the different nature of purchasing from pet shops or garden centres, which tends to be more spontaneous.

29% saw their pet with his/her mum and 26% visited their home visit from the breeder, seller or rehoming charity.

18% of owners who got their cat from a breeder or private seller made sure that the breeder was a member of an assured breeder scheme (e.g. the GCCF Breeder Scheme). 4% of cat owners saw their pet with their dad. Just 6% state that the breeder, seller or rehoming charity visited their home to assess it, and 5% checked that the breeder or seller would complete some form of signed contract of sale. 46% of rabbit owners did none of these – significantly higher than dog or cat owners. These figures reflect the different nature of purchasing from pet shops or garden centres, which tends to be more spontaneous.

12% of owners had a home visit from the breeder, seller or rehoming charity to assess their home. 18% of owners who got their cat from a breeder or private seller made sure that the breeder was a member of an assured breeder scheme (e.g. the GCCF Breeder Scheme). 4% of cat owners saw their pet with their dad. 39% did none of these.

We were delighted to see that so many veterinary practices offer free pre-purchase advice. We’d encourage anyone who’s thinking of getting a new pet to take advantage of the wealth of knowledge available at their local practice. Vets and vet nurses are always happy to share up-to-date information and tailored advice with prospective pet owners. They can also make you aware of any potential issues with your prospective pet and advise you on how best to manage their introduction to your home.

Pre-purchase

Anyone who owns or cares for animals knows that choosing a pet to join your family is a big decision. It’s vitally important to get the relationship off to the right start by ensuring you pick the best species and breed for your particular circumstances.

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John Fishwick
MA VetMB DCHP DipECBHM MRCVS
President, British Veterinary Association (BVA)

BVA and BVNA surveys

On average, vets and vet nurses estimated that 71% of potential pet owners who were not existing clients of the practice go on to join the practice after receiving a free pre-purchase consultation.

Of those vets and vet nurses working in practices which do not offer pre-purchase consultations the majority said that the practice either had not considered offering this service (46%) and/or did not feel that there was sufficient demand (44%). However 90% of those working in practices not currently offering pre-purchase consultations said these were something they would consider offering.

When asked what additional help and support would assist veterinary practices in dealing with pre-purchase issues veterinary professionals selected:

- Client leaflets (75%)
- National awareness campaigns (71%)
- Social media templates to communicate with owners (56%)
- Practice posters (54%)
- Campaigns to review the current legislation concerning sale of pet animals (52%)
- Promotion of use of Puppy Contract (46%)
- Media engagement (44%)
- CPD (35%)
- Consultation frameworks for pet purchasing with owners (31%)
- Email templates to be sent to owners (30%)

...and the majority of owners are taking this important step, this is a figure that should be higher, highlighting the need to educate owners further in this area.

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Environment

Daily exercise is vital for a dog’s physical health and mental wellbeing. 32% of owners walk their dog once a day, which is consistent with data from previous years. Nearly half of dogs (49%) are walked more than once a day, but, again consistent with recent PAW Reports, 89,000 dogs (1%) are never walked at all.

Why are some owners choosing not to walk their dogs at all? Top answers given were:
- Garden is big enough for exercise (40%)
- I have health problems (19%)
- My dog has health problems (17%)
- Restricted areas to exercise a dog where I live (16%)

With recent consultations on Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs) there has been some concern about whether there could be widespread bans on walking dogs in public spaces. Should this be the case, there would be a great risk that the numbers of dogs not being walked at all could increase, especially as 78% of dog owners say that they rely on public spaces (e.g. parks, beaches) to be able to walk their dog.

And while 47% of owners who walk their dog had no concerns at all about walking them, others expressed concerns which included:
- being scared of their dog being attacked by another dog (17%)
- time restrictions (13%)
- concern over their dog’s behaviour on a walk (10%)
- that their dog doesn’t come back when called (10%).

Yet, as we can see from our dog behaviour section in this report, 1.1 million dogs (12%) have received no training in any way. Aside from daily exercise, we were interested to know how pets are occupied, and what steps, if any, are being taken by owners to keep them physically and mentally fit.

We asked dog owners …

Which of the following does your dog regularly do?

- Play in the house: 74%
- Play in the garden: 74%
- Play with toys: 73%
- Play with other dogs: 47%
- Have sticks thrown for them: 27%
- Play with a football: 22%

1.4 million dogs (16%) are walked less than once a day

89% of veterinary professionals agree that the welfare of dogs will suffer if owners are banned from walking their dogs in public spaces (e.g. parks, beaches) or if dogs are required to be kept on leads in these spaces.

Diet

Pet obesity continues to be one of the key welfare issues facing pets in the UK. It remains as one of the top concerns identified by veterinary professionals, with 50% of those surveyed predicting that pet obesity will have the biggest health and welfare implications in ten years’ time.

Many pet owners perceive their pet to be an ideal weight but admit to not knowing their pet’s current weight and/or body condition score (BCS). As in 2017, we asked owners to match an outline of a dog’s shape (ranging from BCS 1–5) with the shape of their dog. 5% of owners selected BCS 5 (obese). Despite this, when asked, less than 1% described their dog as being obese. This indicates more help is needed for owners to understand what a healthy body shape would be for their dog.

Despite 32% of veterinary professionals stating that they typically only discuss weight or body condition score with owners whose pet is overweight or obese, the majority of veterinary professionals (98%) also said that there should be more focus placed on preventing obesity rather than treating it. This suggests that there needs to be more focus on weight and BCS conversations with all dog owners.

Alongside lack of exercise, treats are a likely contributory factor when it comes to pet obesity. 91% of owners give treats to their dog – this is higher than both cat (81%) and rabbit (83%) owners.

80% of dog owners stated their pet was an ideal weight, but 40% knew neither their pet’s weight nor body condition score.

We asked dog owners …

Which of the following do you regularly give your dog?

- Dental chews: 63%
- Leftovers: 27%
- Cheese: 19%
- Rawhide chews: 25%
- Roast dinner: 19%
- Bones: 19%
- Human chocolate: 16%
- Takeaway food: 16%
- Milk: 14%
- Grapes: 13%
- Dog biscuits: 11%

BVA andBVNA surveys

Vets and vet nurses estimated that 46% of the dogs they see in their practice each week are overweight or obese (mean value). Almost half of the vets and vet nurses surveyed (40%) said they felt the proportion of overweight or obese dogs they see in their practice has increased in the last two years, and a similar amount felt that it had stayed the same (41%).

On average vets and vet nurses estimated that around half (47%) of the overweight and obese dogs they see in their practice have health issues which could be related to their weight.

The most common weight-related health issues for dogs identified by vets and vet nurses are:
- Musculoskeletal problems (99%)
- Respiratory problems (49%)
- Diabetes (28%)

Most common reasons for excess weight in dogs identified by vets and vet nurses:
- Owner’s lack of recognition that their pet is overweight or has obesity (65%)
- Feeding treats, in addition to their base diet (53%)
- Feeding human food, in addition to their base diet (50%)
- Portion size (49%)

When asked what influences them to give their pet a treat the top reasons given by dog owners were that it makes their pet happy (43%), it provides variety for him/her (37%), and that treats are a part of their daily diet (37%).

We’ve identified that many dogs are not receiving daily walks, and when combined with a lack of awareness of pet’s weight and/or body condition score and an inappropriate diet, it’s evident there are a combination of factors causing the problem of obesity in the UK dog population.
Our research shows that many cats are still having to share their resources with other cats in the household. This can be the cause of significant stress as without sufficient resources, spaced out around the house, cats aren’t able to avoid each other should they want to. In households with two or more cats owners should provide at least one resource per cat plus one extra.

Some of our key findings include:
- 66% of owners with 2 or more cats are providing 1 or 0 litter trays
- 55% of owners with 2 or more cats are providing 1 or 0 water bowls
- 73% of owners with 2 or more cats are providing 2 or fewer cat beds
- 16% of owners with 2 or more cats are only providing 1 food bowl

Despite the fact that a worrying proportion of owners are providing their cats with too few resources, 95% of owners state that their cat is happy.

As with dogs, the cat obesity problem shows no sign of improving. Just under three-quarters (74%) of cat owners believe their cat is an ideal weight, but nearly two thirds (65%) of owners acknowledge that they don’t know their cat’s current weight and/or body condition score (BCS). 18% of owners describe their cat as being overweight, and 1% report that their cat is obese.

When asked to match an outline of a cat’s shape (ranging from BCS 1-5) with the shape of their cat, 31% of owners selected the image reflecting BCS 3 (ideal) - quite different to the 74% of cat owners who state that their pet is an ideal weight. Over half (53%) of cat owners selected either BCS 4 (overweight) or BCS 5 (obese).

Surprisingly, 76% of cat owners say that they aren’t ever worried about their pet being overweight. This could be because they don’t believe pet obesity is a growing problem, or perhaps because they’re not able to recognise what a healthy weight and body shape is. Further education is needed to help cat owners understand what a healthy weight is for their pet, along with how to tell if their pet is a healthy shape by the look and feel of their body.

One factor likely to be contributing to cat obesity is additional calorie intake through treats. 81% of owners give treats to their cats. The main reasons owners gave for doing so include: it makes their pet feel happy (41%), it provides variety for him/her (39%) and it makes the owner feel happy (22%).

We asked cat owners …

Which of the following do you regularly give your cat?

- Commercial cat treats: 53%
- Fish (other than in cat food): 37%
- Meat (other than in cat food): 32%
- Dental treats: 22%
- Cheese (not formulated for cats): 13%
- Bones: 7%
- Milk (not formulated for cats): 1%

BVA and BVNA surveys

Vets and vet nurses estimated that 34% of the cats they see in their practice each week are overweight or obese (mean value).

Over a third of vets and vet nurses surveyed (34%) said they felt the proportion of overweight or obese cats they see in their practice has increased in the last two years.

On average vets and vet nurses estimated that 35% of the overweight and obese cats they see in their practice have health issues which could be related to their weight.

The most common weight-related health issues for cats identified by vets and vet nurses are:
- Grooming / self-care issues (77%)
- Diabetes (66%)
- Musculoskeletal problems (66%)

Most common reasons for excess weight in cats identified by vets and vet nurses:
- Owner’s lack of recognition that their pet is overweight or has obesity (68%)
- Portion size (63%)

We asked cat owners ...
This year’s PAW Report has shown improvements in the way pet rabbits are fed, but there is still a long way to go before all rabbits receive the ideal diet. The numbers have come down from an all time high of 49% of rabbits being fed muesli as part of their main diet, to 20% this year, and the proportion of rabbits being fed hay as the main part of their diet has increased from 62% in 2011 to 77% in 2018. Most rabbits are certainly getting closer to an optimum diet, but we would like to see all rabbits on a diet based mainly on hay, with additional fresh green fibrous veg and a small amount of pelleted food, as explained in this year’s Rabbit Awareness Week (RAW) campaign.

Richard A Saunders
BSc (Hons) BVSc MRCVS DZooMed CBiol FBiol RCVS
Specialist in Zoological Medicine (Mammalian)
RWAF Veterinary Adviser

BVA and BVNA surveys
Vets and vet nurses estimated that 30% of the rabbits they see in their practice each week are overweight or obese (mean value).

A quarter (26%) of vets and vet nurses surveyed said they felt the proportion of overweight or obese rabbits they see in their practice has increased in the last two years, and almost a half (49%) felt that it had stayed the same.

On average vets and vet nurses estimated that 16% of the overweight and obese rabbits they see in their practice have health issues which could be related to their weight.

The most common weight-related health issues for rabbits identified by vets and vet nurses are:
- Grooming / self-care issues (93%)
- Musculoskeletal problems (42%)
- Respiratory problems (1 1%)

Most common reasons for excess weight in rabbits identified by vets and vet nurses:
- Inappropriate choice of animal food e.g. wrong food for life stage or exercise level (58%)
- Lack of exercise (54%)
- Owner’s lack of recognition that their pet is overweight or has obesity (49%)

79% of veterinary professionals agree that rabbit muesli should be removed from sale

Unwanted behaviours
Rabbits displaying unwanted behaviours could be doing so for a number of reasons, including ill health, stress, loneliness and boredom. 54% of owners report that their rabbit displays at least one behaviour that they’d like to change. Despite this, the majority (78%) of owners don’t think that their pet is stressed. Only 6% report that they think their rabbit is stressed.

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RWAF Veterinary Adviser

We asked rabbit owners ...
Which of the following behaviours does your rabbit display that you would like to change?

We asked rabbit owners ...
Which of the following, if any, is your rabbit afraid of?

Fears
66% of owners report that their rabbit is afraid of something.

We asked rabbit owners ...
Which of the following, if any, is your rabbit afraid of?

31% Loud noises
18% Fireworks
16% Travelling in the car
12% The vet
8% Unfamiliar people
8% Thunder and lightning

34% of owners report that their rabbit isn’t afraid of anything, which is higher than in cats and dogs. However, as they are prey animals, it’s possible that this is because fear in rabbits may be more difficult to identify than in dogs and cats.

Reassuringly, 43% of rabbit owners would seek help from a veterinary practice to change unwanted behaviours. However, just 11% of veterinary professionals report that their practice offers behaviour clinics or specific advice on this topic for rabbits.

34% of owners report that their rabbit isn’t afraid of anything, which is higher than in cats and dogs. However, as they are prey animals, it’s possible that this is because fear in rabbits may be more difficult to identify than in dogs and cats.