



Being #DogKind:

How in tune are we with the needs of our canine companions?



A photograph of a person walking a dog in a grassy field during sunset. The person is on the left, holding a leash. The dog is in the center, walking away from the camera. The background features a large, leafy tree and a fence line. The sky is bright and hazy, suggesting a golden hour setting. The overall mood is peaceful and serene.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dogs are Britain's most popular pet. There are an estimated 11.5 million dogs in the UK and, in 2017, a quarter of all UK households were reported to share their homes with a dog. But how much do we really understand about them and do we behave in a way which is #DogKind and ensures they are physically fit and psychologically fulfilled? Put simply, are they healthy and happy?

We surveyed more than 3,000 dogs' owners and asked about their knowledge of, and behaviour around, the behavioural and social needs of their canine companions, as well as their attitudes and behaviour towards dog training and problematic behaviour.

Key findings, include:

87%

87 percent of respondents said they agreed or strongly agreed that dogs need and value the company of people but 22 percent of dogs spend four hours or more alone during an average weekday. Typically when left alone, only nine percent are walked by someone else and five percent are visited by someone else.

Nearly

50%

Nearly half of all dogs get, on average, between 30 and 60 minutes exercise every day; six percent of dog owners report not walking their dog every day.

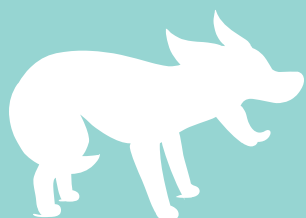
Nearly

20%

Nearly 20 percent of dogs are never let off the lead when walked.

93%

93 percent of owners said they agreed or strongly agreed that dogs need regular opportunities to play. 67 percent of dogs always have access to toys in the home but 22 percent never have toys to play with during exercise.



Avoidance behaviour (e.g. cowering, trembling, panting, whining, freezing, hiding and seeking) in response to loud noises was the most commonly reported behaviour.

OUR FUTURE ACTIVITIES AND INITIATIVES WILL BE DESIGNED TO ACHIEVE THESE OUTCOMES AND HELP OWNERS

In general, our findings suggest that many of the dog owners surveyed have a good understanding of what dogs need, behaviourally and socially, to be happy and healthy. A high proportion agree or agreed strongly with statements regarding company, exercise, play and training. So, at face value based on our findings, the respondents appear to be largely in tune with what their dogs need. However, the knowledge held by the owners did not always appear to translate into behaviour, which means that while many owners had a level of understanding which suggests their dogs should be happy and healthy, their behaviour towards their dogs may fail to ensure this. When it comes to beliefs about what dogs feel and how they learn, a high number of owners appear to think of their dogs as people rather than a different species.



Photo: David Millard



There are a range of reasons as to why owners don't seek help for behaviour problems and if they do, advice tends to be sought from online sources.

39%

Just 39 percent of dog owners attend or attended training classes, yet 93 percent of dog owners strongly agree or agree that dogs should be trained how to behave from an early age.

70%

The use of reward-based methods is high: praise 70 percent, toys 45 percent and food/treats 71 percent but a worrying number report using aversive training methods such as check chains 13 percent and shouting 10 percent.

More than

40%

More than 40 percent of owners believe that dogs could experience guilt. This is a complex emotion and evidence that dogs can feel this is lacking.

Of most concern was the knowledge of, and behaviour about, problematic behaviour. A large number of owners did not seek help for behaviour problems and if they did it tended to be from sources which cannot be guaranteed to be evidence based or up to date. This places dog welfare at risk.

This report marks the launch of a new campaign by the RSPCA #DogKind. It aims to help new and existing owners to be #DogKind by getting to know their dog and behave in ways which provide for their dog's behavioural and social needs. To achieve this, three necessary outcomes have been identified:

- Access to information which aids a standardised and up-to-date knowledge of dog welfare and behaviour among the general public.

- Solutions which drive and support real behaviour change, consistent with knowledge, which enables owners to provide their dog with a lifestyle that ensures their health and happiness.

- Access to dog services which are evidence based and up to date in their approach, placing dog welfare first and foremost.

TRAIN, CARE AND MANAGE DOGS IN WAYS THAT COMPLEMENT THEIR BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIAL NEEDS.

1. Introduction

Originating from the grey wolf¹, dogs have been part of our lives for thousands of years. With the exception of fish, dogs are Britain's most popular pet with a quarter of all UK households sharing their homes with a dog in 2017². There are an estimated 11.5 million dogs in the UK³ and more than 340 different 'recognised' breeds worldwide⁴. Some breeds or types of dog continue to have specific roles within society e.g. sheepdogs to herd livestock, and there are an ever-increasing number of roles which many breeds and individuals can fulfil e.g. assistance dogs and medical detection dogs. However, social structural changes and industrialisation over past decades have resulted in a move away from the role of dogs being predominantly functional to being increasingly that of companions and pets. Large numbers of us share our homes and lives with dogs, but how much do we really understand about them and do we behave in a way that ensures they are physically fit and psychologically fulfilled or, put simply, healthy and happy?

Ensuring that animals are kept in ways which provide for their physical and psychological needs is enshrined in legislation. In England and Wales this is through the Animal Welfare Act (2006)⁵. The Act places a duty on those who keep animals to ensure the needs of their animals are met. Owners are required to take positive steps to ensure they care for their animals properly and in particular must provide for the five welfare needs, which are the **need**:

- for a suitable environment
- for a suitable diet
- to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- to be housed with, or apart, from other animals
- to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.



Guidance to provide for these needs is available for owners in the forms of Codes of Practice⁶ and these present practical information to help owners comply with the provisions of the Act. Based on a dog's biology and behaviour, it presents 'what you need to know' and 'what you should do' for each 'welfare need' or, in other words, the knowledge and behaviour required of an owner to keep a dog happy and healthy. Yet, despite the law being in effect for more than 10 years, findings from the *PDSA Animal Wellbeing Report 2017*⁷ suggest that awareness of the Act and the welfare needs is poor with only 39 percent of people surveyed reporting that they are familiar with them. With more than half of dog owners being unfamiliar with the Act and its needs, it is possible that a large number of dogs are being cared for in ways which don't fulfill some or any of their welfare needs, or in ways which are inadequate or inappropriate.

In recent years there have been significant scientific advances in our understanding of how dogs see the world, think, feel, learn, and interact with people, dogs and other animals⁸. This knowledge has challenged some long-held views around how we see dogs and has greatly influenced and changed understanding of how we should behave towards, and care for, them. For example, it was not that long ago that we used wolf social structures, sometimes in artificially constructed captive wolf packs, to help us understand dog social behaviour as well as dog behaviour towards people⁹. Yet when dogs themselves were studied¹⁰, marked differences to the accepted theories were observed and this has contributed to a revolution in how we train and modify behaviour problems in dogs¹¹.

As our understanding of dog behaviour and welfare develops and advances within the scientific and welfare communities are made, it is vital that this information is made available to, and implemented by, all those who care for and interact with dogs but this raises challenges. Firstly, we need people to want to access the information and there are those who may not feel it necessary to acquire information on dog care. Dogs live in such close proximity to us that for some people, 'knowledge' about dogs does not have to be sought from evidence-based sources but is instead acquired through experience and regular contact with them. Yet studies have shown that in the absence of theoretical knowledge around dogs, those who care for them are not able to correctly interpret the majority of dog behaviours¹². In contrast, some people will actively and enthusiastically seek out information from various sources but with a lack of a single centralised and authoritative information source¹³ what is available varies in quality and is often contradictory¹⁴. However, empowering owners with knowledge is only part of the issue as it doesn't necessarily translate into behaviour change. There are likely to be a whole host of factors influencing whether or not an owner behaves towards their dog in ways consistent with their knowledge and understanding. Influencing human behaviour change is an area very much in its infancy with regards to dog behaviour and while desperately needed, there is much we don't know.

One of the goals of the RSPCA is to improve pet welfare and ensure that every pet is cared for properly. This report marks the launch of a new campaign: #DogKind which aims to help owners be kind to their dog by helping them better understand and deliver their dog's social, behaviour and training needs. We present findings from a survey commissioned to explore owner knowledge of, and their behaviour around, the behavioural and social needs of their canine companions. The survey's key highlights are discussed and outcomes are proposed which we believe are necessary to improve dog welfare and will help inform the #DogKind campaign.

“There are an estimated **11.5 million** dogs in the UK³ and more than **340** different ‘recognised’ breeds worldwide⁴”



Behaving normally – what is normal dog behaviour?

As group living animals, dogs naturally desire social contact with other dogs although this is dependent on experiences during socialisation and early development. Likewise, many dogs enjoy and value human company forming very strong social bonds and attachments to people.

Relationships can also be formed with other species and their ability to form flexible social structures means that people, dogs and other animals can become part of their family group. This allows us to provide the companionship which so many dogs need to thrive and feel secure but also means the failure to provide contact or to teach a dog to cope when left alone can have a negative impact on dogs' mental wellbeing and result in behaviour problems.

Living as part of a family group means that complex and effective communication is necessary if dogs are to safely form and maintain relationships. Much of this communication is through body language including the use of their ears, tail, facial gestures and eyes. For example, dogs who are uncomfortable with a situation and need more 'space' will often yawn, lick their lips, sneeze, blink or turn their head away. Failure to recognise these signals can lead dogs to escalate their behaviour in efforts to make it even clearer as to how they feel. It could, for example, lead to a display of aggression – behaviour which is normal for dogs but considered undesirable in many cases by their owners (see page 9).

Dogs are naturally inquisitive and will actively seek information about their surroundings. Sniffing is a very important behaviour as scent is used to identify individuals, their mood, health and reproductive status, where they have been, what they have eaten, to find food, follow trails, navigate, locate places and determine if you are a friend or threat. Outdoor exercise provides important opportunities for

dogs to sniff as well as investigating their surroundings and exploring. In addition, exercise can enable dogs not just to walk but, if off the lead, trot and run. As well as benefits to physical health and fitness, it provides opportunities for other natural behaviours like playing and interacting with other dogs.



Unlike other canids or humans, dogs play into adulthood and in a whole host of ways. They will play with other dogs, with toys or objects by themselves and with people. How much dogs play and what type is hugely variable between individuals but it is thought that dogs highly enjoy and value it.

A range of vocal sounds are used by dogs: barking, howling, whining and growling. Although we don't understand the purpose or meaning of all the different sounds, they can be helpful in understanding what dogs are thinking and feeling. For example, sudden, rapid, high-pitched barking can indicate a dog is feeling threatened and trying to drive the threat away whereas 'yippping' can indicate a desire to play.

All dogs need rest and while individuals will vary, it is estimated that on average, dogs need between 14 to 17 hours sleep per day.

When normal behaviour becomes problematic

The way in which a dog behaves is dependent on his or her breeding, rearing and past experiences. In particular, whether a dog grows up to be well adjusted without being fearful, anxious or worried is largely dependent on their opportunities for socialisation and habituation. Socialisation is a process during which puppies learn about and bond with other dogs, people and other animals and occurs between three and 14 weeks of age. Habituation teaches dogs that noises, objects and activities in their lives are safe. If dogs are not appropriately or adequately socialised and habituated they are at risk of developing behavioural disorders later in life including fear, anxiety and aggression towards unfamiliar people, dogs and/or other animals. While avoidance of things that scare them and aggression are normal behavioural responses for dogs, it becomes abnormal or a sign of bad welfare, if they are displayed on a regular basis. These behaviours are also often problematic for the dogs' owners and can result in methods or equipment being used to stop the behaviour that can make the dog's fear or anxiety worse, making the behaviour problem worse in turn and potentially causing other problems.

There are also a range of behaviours which are considered normal for dogs to display or perform but which many owners find undesirable. For example, mounting behaviour and bottom sniffing during dog-dog greetings. In addition, there are other normal behaviours which owners find problematic including stealing food, chasing, barking, digging and scent marking.



2. Dog Owners' Survey methodology

The RSPCA undertook a survey among 3,049 dog owners^A. Dog owners were asked to provide details about their gender, age, region, housing status, income, number of pets owned and dogs owned, along with their dog's breed, reason for choosing that breed or type, age at acquisition, source and current age of most recent dog.

To understand how knowledgeable the respondents were around the behavioural, training and social needs of their dogs, a series of statements were randomly presented to determine strength of agreement on a range of issues including: the need for exercise; opportunities to play; training from a young age; telling dogs off if they have done something 'wrong'^B; praising dogs when they have done something 'correct'; training dogs with reward-based methods and punitive methods as well as emotions and feelings dogs may experience.

Corresponding questions were included to determine how owners behaved towards their dogs including: play behaviour between the dog and owner and giving access to play items; frequency and duration of exercise; attendance at dog training classes; methods used to train dogs; and what happens when their dog is left alone.

Owners were also asked whether their dog currently or had in the past displayed a range of behaviours which are commonly presented to clinical animal behaviourists (Table 1), whether they found the behaviour a problem, and if it was, had they sought help and where from. If they hadn't sought help, they were asked why not.

“ The RSPCA undertook

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TABLE 1:

COMMONLY REFERRED PROBLEMATIC BEHAVIOURS PRESENTED TO DOG OWNERS IN THE SURVEY ^C

DOES/DID YOUR DOG COWER, TREMBLE, PANT, WHINE, FREEZE, HIDE, SEEK WHEN/IF:

- He/she hears loud noises (e.g. fireworks, slamming doors)
- He/she is approached by other dogs on walks
- He/she is approached, stroked or touched by people they know
- He/she is approached, stroked or touched by strangers

DOES OR DID YOUR DOG BARK OR GROWL, SNAP, NIP OR BITE WHEN/IF:

- Meeting people they know
- Meeting people they don't know
- Meeting other cats and dogs that live in the same house
- Meeting other dogs they don't know

DOES OR DID YOUR DOG LUNGE, BARK, GROWL:

- At people they know
- At people they don't know
- At other cats or dogs in the household
- At other animals including dogs they don't know

IF YOUR DOG IS AT HOME ALONE DOES HE/SHE OR DID HE/SHE WHINE, HOWL OR BARK, WEE OR POO, CHEW, SCRATCH OR DESTROY THINGS IN THE HOUSE

IF A PERSON APPROACHES YOUR DOG WHILE HE/SHE IS EATING, HAS A BONE OR A TOY, DO OR DID THEY FREEZE, BECOME TENSE, GROWL OR SNAP?

DOES OR DID YOUR DOG CHASE:

- Traffic and/or cyclists and/or joggers
- Livestock and/or wildlife and/or other animals e.g. cats

DOES OR DID YOUR DOG:

- Pull on the lead when out walking
- Jump up at people
- Not come back when called
- Seek attention e.g. whining
- Take food from worktops, tables etc
- Wee or poo in the house due to a lack of toilet training
- Eat, chew or destroy inappropriate items when you are at home

A. The survey was conducted online by Atomik Research during 11–17 July 2017.

B. Whether a behaviour is considered wrong or correct is very much dependent on an individual owner's perception and what they do or don't find desirable within their dog's behavioural repertoire.

C. The list of context and behavioural signs presented in Table 1 were developed by Lesley Raw and Dr Emily Blackwell.

3. Key findings

3.1 The dogs



Source of dog:

44% – had come from a breeder

22% – from a UK rescue centre

15% – from a relative

5% – from a rescue centre abroad

3% – from a pet shop



Age of dog:

24% – were between two and three years of age

24% – were older than eight

19% – were less than a year of age



Breed: A range of breeds were owned with nearly one-third not listed in the survey:

21% – were crossbreeds

13% – Labrador or golden retriever

2% – were French bulldog

1% – were of unknown breed

3.2 The dog owning population



Dog ownership: All of the participants of this survey owned at least one dog:

76% – of respondents owned one dog

20% – owned two dogs

4% – owned three or more dogs



Choice of breed: When asked why the respondents chose their breed of dog:

21% – said they had owned the breed before as an adult

13% – as a child

12% – knew someone else who had the breed and liked it

10% – chose the dog based on their personality and character rather than breed or type

10% – did lots of research believing this was the dog best suited to their lifestyle

Gender:



54% – were female

46% – were male

Age: Of the dog owners surveyed:



34% – were 55+ year olds

Around 20% each of other age groups

3% – were 18–24 year olds

Housing:



43% – were married/cohabiting with a partner, with a child or children living at home

34% – were married/cohabiting with a partner with no children living at home

11% – lived alone

5% – lived with parents

5% – were single parents with a child/children living at home

2% – were in a flat share

0.3% – were single parents with children having left home/gone to university

Income:



54% – lived in dual income households

30% – lived in single income households

12% – were retired

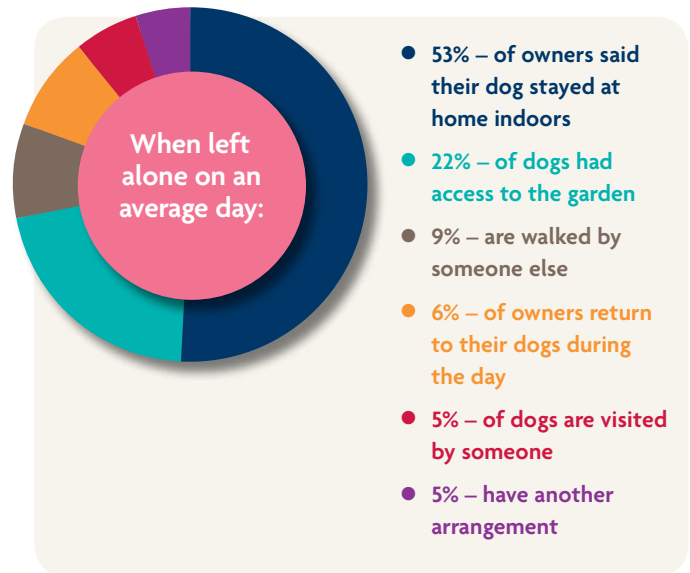
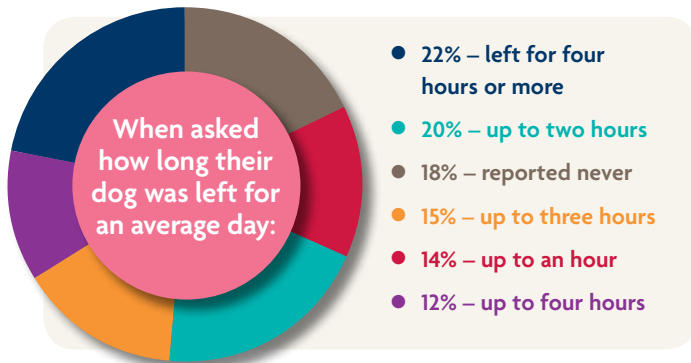
4% – percent were unemployed



3.3 Knowledge of, and behaviour relating to, the behavioural and social needs of dogs

The company of people

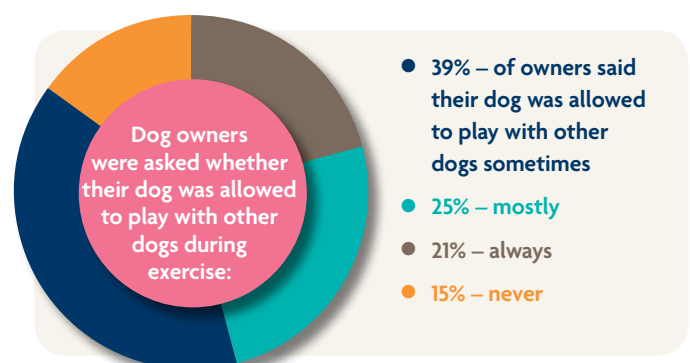
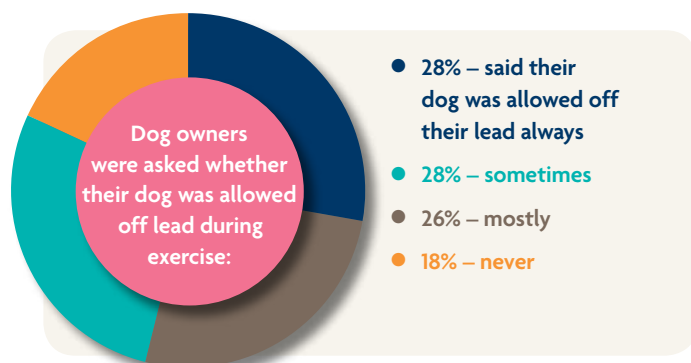
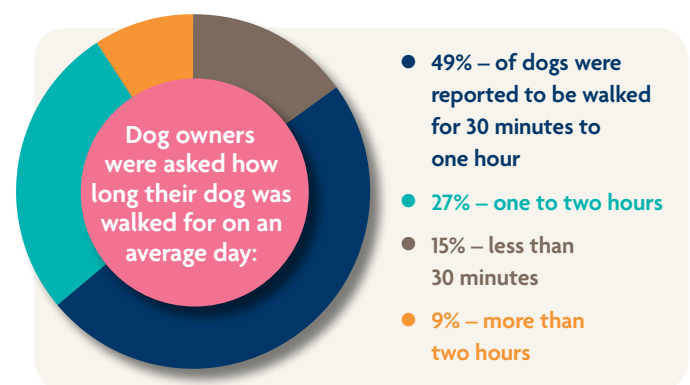
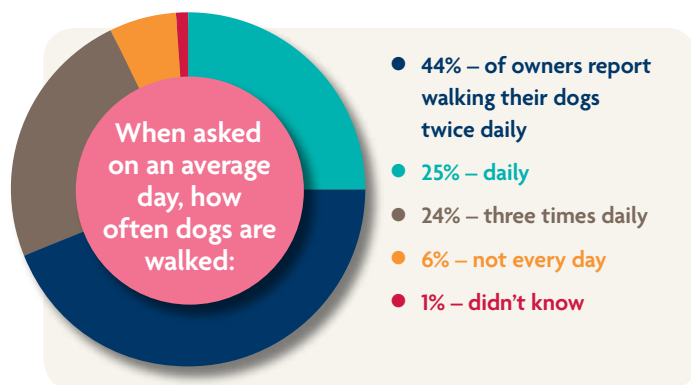
87% – of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that dogs need and enjoy the company of people.



Opportunities for exercise

93% – of dog owners agreed or strongly agreed that dogs need regular exercise, at least once a day.

91% – of dog owners agreed or strongly agreed that their dog got enough exercise to keep them happy and healthy.





- 28% – of owners sometimes took a ball or toy for their dog to play with
- 25% – always
- 24% – mostly
- 22% – reported never

A variety of equipment was reported by owners to exercise their dogs including long lead (53 percent), short lead (39 percent), standard flat collar (33 percent), harness (26 percent), half check chain (six percent), head collars (five percent), full check chains (four percent) and pinch collars (four percent).

Opportunities for play

93% – of respondents stated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the need for dogs to have regular opportunities to play.



- 48% – played activities not listed.
- 47% – played fetch
- 44% – played with a tug toy
- 33% – played chase
- 17% – played hide and seek

We asked if dogs had access to toys or objects to play with in the home. 67 percent of dog owners reported that their dog always had access to toys, only two percent reported 'never'.

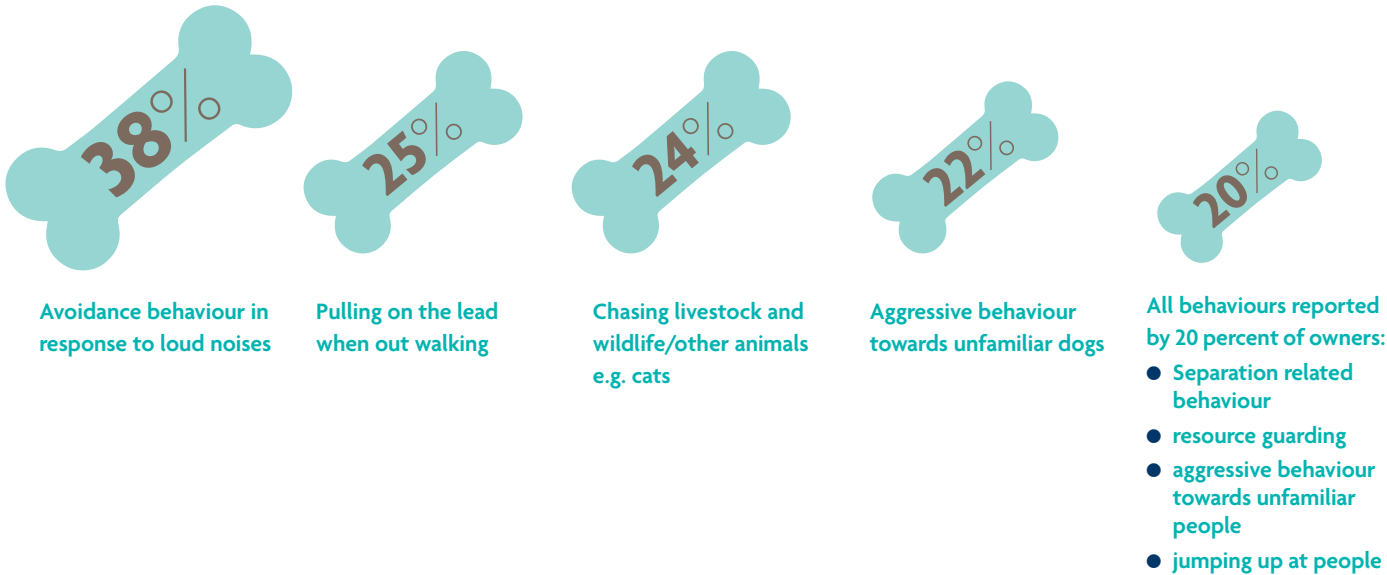


Photo: Becky Murray/RSPCA Photolibrary

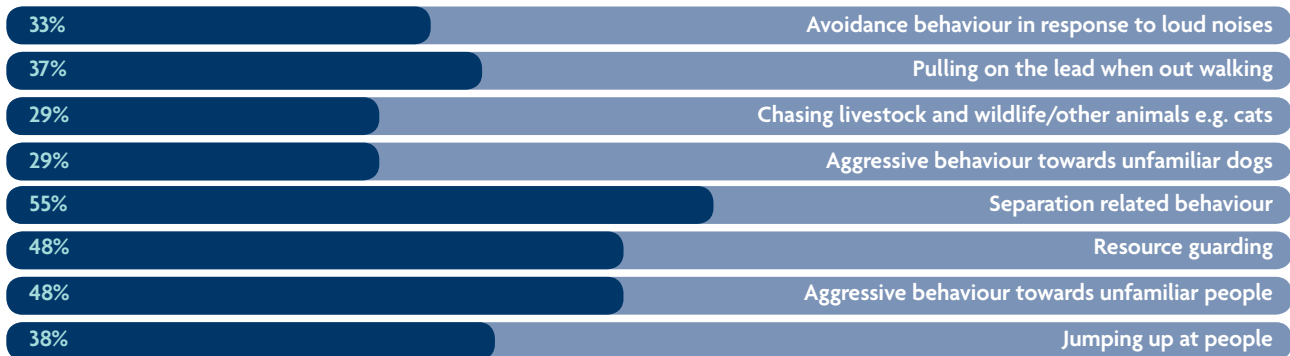


Understanding behaviour

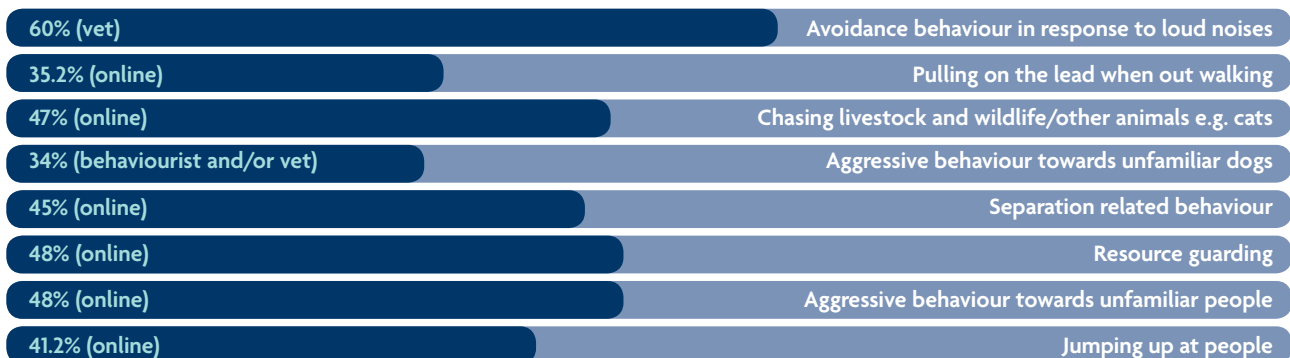
We asked dog owners which, if any, of a range of different behaviours their dog was currently showing or had displayed in the past (see Table 1). The top five behaviours most commonly reported by dog owners were:



Not all owners had sought help for these behaviours. The percentage of owners who had sought help is as follows:



When asked where owners had sought help from, the most popular source differed between the various behaviours:

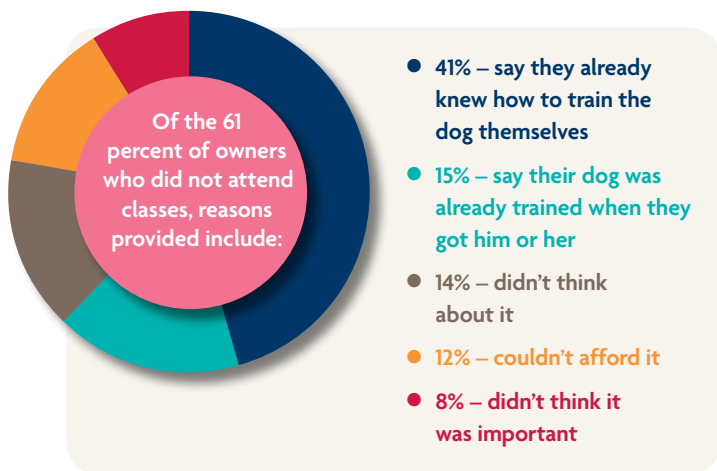


Where help had not been sought for the behaviours, various reasons were stated as to why not. The most popular reason for why help hadn't been sought for each behaviour was:

40% (owner had sorted the problem themselves)	Avoidance behaviour in response to loud noises
43.2% (owner had sorted the problem themselves)	Pulling on the lead when out walking
37% (behaviour not considered a problem)	Chasing livestock and wildlife/other animals e.g. cats
38% (owner had sorted the problem themselves)	Aggressive behaviour towards unfamiliar dogs
43% (owner had sorted the problem themselves)	Separation related behaviour
43% (behaviour not considered a problem)	Resource guarding
41% (behaviour not considered a problem)	Aggressive behaviour towards unfamiliar people
44% (owner had sorted the problem themselves)	Jumping up at people

Training classes, methods and equipment

The majority of dog owners agree or strongly agree (93 percent) that dogs need to be trained to behave well from a young age. However, only 39 percent believe it is important that dogs attend training classes and 39 percent have attended or are currently attending training classes.



When we asked about the methods of training used, 93 percent of owners agreed or strongly agreed that dogs should be praised when they do something good and only one percent disagreed.

70 percent of owners reported using praise, 71 percent food and treats, 45 percent toys and nearly one-fifth used a clicker. Nonetheless, punitive methods and equipment were used by some dog owners: check chain (13 percent), shouting (10 percent), pinch collar (seven percent), spray collar (six percent), electronic shock collar (five percent), smacking/hitting (two percent).

88 percent of owners strongly agreed or agreed that training shouldn't frighten, worry or hurt dogs but 79 percent of owners strongly agreed or agreed that dogs should be told off if they have done something wrong and nearly one-fifth of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it was fine to shout at or hit dogs if they did something wrong.

Emotions

We asked dog owners what emotions or feelings they thought dogs could experience:

- Happiness – 87%
- Fear – 82%
- Love towards people – 79%
- Boredom – 74%
- Jealousy – 70%
- Sadness – 63%
- Love towards dogs – 63%
- Worry – 62%
- Anger – 53%
- Guilt – 42%
- None of the emotions listed – 2%



4. Key highlights – owner knowledge of, and behaviour towards, the behavioural and social needs of dogs

The company of people

Many dogs value and need human company and their presence provides opportunities for fulfilling other needs such as exercise and toileting. Hence, most animal welfare organisations recommend leaving dogs alone for no more than four hours at a time. For some dogs though, even a short period of time may cause distress.

Our survey found that on an average working day, owners reported that more than one-fifth of dogs are left alone for longer than this recommended period. Similar figures from the *PDSA Animal Wellbeing Report 2017*¹⁵ suggested that 19 percent of dogs are left alone for five hours or more on a typical weekday. In our survey, one-fifth of dogs were reported to, or had in the past, shown separation related behaviour (SRB) meaning when left alone in the house the dog whines, howls or barks, wees or poos, chews, scratches or destroys things in the house. This number is likely to be an underestimate as by its very nature, SRB is only displayed in the absence of the owner and so many owners will be unaware of their dog's response to being alone unless it is recorded or there is tangible evidence (e.g. destroyed objects).

A range of services are now available to dogs who may otherwise spend extended periods of time alone including: dog walking services, dog sitters and daycare facilities all of which have increased in number over recent years. In some cases, owners can also arrange for their dog to go to work with them. Despite alternative options to leaving dogs home alone being available, in our survey these seemed to be rarely used, with only five percent of dogs reported to be visited and nine percent walked by someone else when alone. Such low numbers may be due to a lack of awareness around these types of services, but could also be explained by a lack of understanding of the importance of human company for dogs and so are considered unnecessary for their dog. Likewise, being unaware of how their dog behaves when on their own could also explain the result.

Owners do need to take care over the services they use however, as at present there is little regulation across these activities. While forthcoming legislation will address this for daycare services, dog sitting and dog walking will be unaffected and it will remain somewhat of a lottery as to the quality of service provided. In the absence of regulation, standardised and up-to-date guidance on how to find a suitable dog walker and sitter is much needed.

Exercise and play

Outdoor exercise is hugely important for dogs providing opportunities to perform strongly motivated behaviours including sniffing and investigating their surroundings as well as exploring.

Depending on how the exercise is provided, it can give them choice and control over where they can go and what they do which can often be restricted in the household environment. In addition, exercise can allow dogs to perform a range of movement, not just walking but trotting and running. As well as benefits to physical health and fitness, it provides opportunities for other natural behaviours like interacting with other people and dogs¹⁶, as well as play which is important for positive experiences and social bonding^{17 18}.

Based on our survey results, most owners did agree that regular opportunities for play were important and a range of games were reported to be played. Likewise owners agreed that dogs needed regular opportunities for exercise and dogs were reported to be exercised in ways which reflected that knowledge. While many dogs were taken out for a walk, the quality of walk and opportunities for a range of behaviour appeared to vary. Owners reported that nearly one-fifth of dogs never get off the lead, 15 percent never play with other dogs and more than one-fifth don't get a ball or toy to play with. In some cases, owners may believe that a lead walk is sufficient to fulfill a dog's needs or their dog may be disinterested in playing with toys when out of the house, but there may be a range of other factors which prevent dogs from being allowed off lead. For example, poor recall or limited areas for safe off lead exercise.

There is a need to understand the rationale behind the different behaviours of these owners and to identify meaningful solutions which provide outlets for dogs to exercise well and play.



Photos: Joe Murphy x2/RSPCA Photolibrary



Understanding behaviour

In our survey we asked owners to report whether their dog had in the past, or currently, performed a range of behaviours. The options listed included behaviours normal for dogs to display, but which may be considered problematic or undesirable by some owners e.g. taking food from worktops, as well as behaviours that in addition could be indicative of a negative emotional state e.g. destructive behaviour when left home alone.

The most commonly reported behaviour, at nearly 40 percent, was avoidance of loud noises. Display of behaviours including cowering, trembling, whining, freezing and hiding in response to loud noises is not uncommon^{19 20 21} and so this finding is unsurprising. However, of those who reported this behaviour, only one-third sought help; this low number is, however, consistent with studies exploring noise fears²². In contrast, other behaviours were less commonly reported but a greater (but still, perhaps, surprisingly low) proportion of owners reported seeking help, including for separation related behaviour (55 percent), resource guarding (48 percent) and aggressive behaviour towards unfamiliar people (48 percent).

Dog behaviour problems are a significant factor contributing to relinquishment²³ and euthanasia²⁴ and can have a major impact on the dog-human relationship²⁵ and hence potentially on the welfare of both. Understanding which behaviours are perceived as problematic by owners, and the factors which affect whether owners seek help or not, is a critical part of ensuring dogs are able to live happy and healthy lives and harmoniously with their owners. A recent study has found that behaviours of dogs are perceived differently by different owners and this perception affects their willingness to modify that behaviour²⁶. It has been suggested that owners tend only to seek advice when their pet's 'problem' behaviour reaches a level of severity that risks affecting their lifestyle²⁷ or where behaviour is a source of embarrassment e.g. when out in public²⁸. This is supported by Pirrone et al's study²⁹ which found that owners were three times more likely to want to address aggressive related behaviours than any others.

Further insights into owner attitude to, perception of, and behaviour towards, dog behaviour problems are clearly key to developing effective treatment strategies as well as preventing relinquishment and protecting the dog-human relationship.

However, in addition to this, behaviour problems are not, in general, well recognised by owners and their seriousness or the impact of the behaviour may not be recognised. This further explains why help is not always sought³⁰ and possibly explains the survey results showing many of the owners reporting behaviours in their dogs but not seeking help. Thus as well as strengthening our understanding about the motivations to seek help for behaviour problems, **there is a need to raise recognition of, and understanding around, dog**

behaviour, especially in relation to those behaviours which might not impact on the owner, but impact on a dog's welfare and quality of life or on the wellbeing of others (e.g. other dogs who are the target of a dog's aggression).

Where help hadn't been sought, the most popular reason was because the owner had sorted out the problem themselves. This raises questions around how the behaviour was modified and whether, in the case of behaviours indicative of negative emotional states, the dog really has now learnt to cope e.g. with something that was previously scary to him or her. Whether the emotional component to the behaviour has been resolved or if it is still there despite a change in the original behavioural response, is crucial to the dog's welfare state. Where help was sought, the sources used varied across the different behaviour problems and included vets and behaviourists. However, in the main, 'online' was cited as the most popular source for the majority of the top behaviours. This is consistent with findings from the *PDSA Animal Wellbeing Report 2017*³¹. The reliance on online sources for advice around behaviour problems is worrying as it is fraught with risk given the potential for inaccurate and outdated information, though these risks are not confined to the internet.

Although some owners did report approaching vets for help, the veterinary profession has faced criticism for its lack of knowledge around behaviour³² as well as the quality of assessment of behaviour, and provision of behavioural support during consultations with clients³³. Encouraging the veterinary industry to improve education around behaviour, to raise behavioural issues during consultations and to refer clients to more specialist help (as they would in the case of many physical ailments) is therefore very important.

Owners seeking advice and help around training and behavioural therapy would be best advised to look for a relevant specialist.

The recognition of vets as being a key source of advice and information around physical health is well established and this should be the same for trainers and behaviour therapists when it comes to seeking advice on training and behaviour problems. But unlike vets who are regulated by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, no such regulatory body exists for those practising in the behaviour industry. This means there are an overwhelming number of behaviour therapists and trainers available as well as a myriad of terms describing their ethos, approach, methods, techniques and equipment³⁴. This is hugely confusing for owners and concerning when outdated methods and techniques still embraced by some can place dogs and owners at risk. **There is therefore an urgent need for regulation of those who practise within the industry³⁵ to ensure that dog owners can access professionals who are not only up to date and evidence based in their approach, but also work in ways that protect the welfare of dogs in their care.**

Why is it important to seek help for behaviour problems?

Sadly, problematic behaviours often lead to a breakdown in the relationship between pets and their owners and can severely compromise the welfare of both dog and owner.

Many owners hope that their dog will 'grow out of' the behaviour, 'calm down' after neutering, or that obedience training will resolve the problem. However there is often an emotional component to the behaviour which requires expert treatment.

Without appropriate behaviour therapy for these disorders, problems tend to worsen over time, as the dog repeatedly encounters the same triggers and the behaviour becomes more well established.

Because we know that bad advice, such as using punishment based training methods, can actually make problems worse, it is important that owners get the right help.

In an age where we routinely turn to the internet for advice, it is perhaps not surprising that people look online for help with their pet's behaviour, but some of the advice available is outdated and frankly dangerous, so it's vital that owners are directed to appropriately qualified professionals (Certified Clinical Animal Behaviourists (CCAB)) and reliable online resources e.g. the RSPCA website.

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Dog training classes

Many of the dog owners surveyed believed that dog training classes were important but only 39 percent of owners had attended or were attending training classes. Low levels of attendance have been reported in scientific studies³⁶ and the *PDSA Animal Wellbeing Report 2017*³⁷ also found low levels of attendance and completion of training classes. While training is clearly important and attendance at appropriate formal classes a desirable option (see page 20), a range of factors influencing participation in training classes have been identified. A need for a multidimensional approach including a range of services as well as facilities and professional development for instructors³⁸ are all important.

A range of training methods and equipment were reported to be used by the owners in our survey. Although the use of reward-based methods and techniques were reported at much greater levels, there were reports of aversive methods and equipment used. Although there is limited empirical scientific data on the effects of training methods and techniques on the welfare of dogs, what is available indicates that methods and techniques which rely on an aversive stimulus to modify behaviour generate stress in dogs³⁹. Furthermore, the large number of trainers and behaviour therapists who achieve successful behaviour modification without subjecting dogs to pain and fear, indicates that reward-based methods are just as effective and hence there is no need or justification to risk dog welfare or the dog-owner relationship by using aversive methods.

Nearly 90 percent of owners strongly agreed or agreed that training shouldn't frighten, worry or hurt dogs but 79 percent of owners strongly agreed or agreed that dogs should be told off if they have done something wrong. This finding suggests that amongst the respondents to our survey, there is a misunderstanding about what dogs find frightening and a lack of understanding around how dogs learn. In very simple terms, dogs learn to show behaviours which result in pleasant experiences, and behaviours which result in unpleasant experiences or are unrewarding are likely to decrease. Decreasing the performance of behaviours can be achieved in two ways: we can do something scary to the dog when the behaviour is performed or we can remove from the dog something that he/she wants when the behaviour is performed.

For example, if we want to stop a dog from jumping up we can hit the dog when he/she jumps which is likely to decrease the behaviour; not jumping up avoids the punishment – or we can remove something that he/she wants when he/she jumps up e.g. remove our attention; jumping up means that good things disappear.

Telling a dog off verbally would also teach a dog not to jump up if the way in which it is done is sufficiently frightening. Although people may be more likely to think of unpleasant experiences in training as the delivery of an electric shock, the use of a pinch collar or hitting a dog, more mild experiences such as shouting and telling dogs off verbally can also equate to unpleasant experiences for some dogs.

Using unpleasant experiences to train dogs comes at a risk to the dog's welfare⁴⁰ and their relationship with us⁴¹. The dog-human relationship is much better protected as is the dog's wellbeing if we teach them using experiences which they enjoy and value. Desirable behaviours can be taught and increased by giving the dog something he likes when the behaviour is performed and we can decrease unwanted behaviours by removing things that he wants or likes.

Telling dogs off when they have done something wrong also poses other risks. As described later, the behavioural signs displayed by dogs in situations where their owner believes they have done something wrong is not an admission of guilt but a predictive response to the owner's previous behaviour (see page 20).



Photo: Joe Murphy, Angela Hampton, Joe Murphy/RSPCA Photolibrary

Why is training important?

Training is one of the most important aspects of responsible dog ownership. Equipping pets with the basic skills necessary to cope with the challenges of our hectic modern lives and enabling owners to keep their dogs under control in public, help to ensure harmonious dog-owner relationships.

While many people are experienced dog owners, who choose to train their pet outside of formal classes, with the field of training and behaviour moving at a fast pace, good quality formal training classes can provide a source of up-to-date, welfare focussed support.

Positive training methods increase trust between dog and owner and training classes can help owners to better understand how their pets learn and how to get the best out of their partnership.

A well trained dog is a happy dog!

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Emotions

Understanding the emotional capacity and limitations of dogs is extremely important as is an understanding that the ways in which dogs feel differ from ours. Dogs are able to experience some of the same emotions as we can including joy, love, anger, fear and anxiety and there is some evidence that they can feel jealous, or at least have a form of jealousy⁴².

However, evidence for dogs having the mental capacity to experience more complex emotions like guilt is lacking⁴³ and in fact studies reveal very different emotions underlying the behaviours which owners often mis-label⁴⁴. Consider the dog who destroys the owner's house whenever he/she is left alone. The owner repeatedly comes home and punishes the dog for making such a mess. Over time the dog associates the arrival of the owner coming home with punishment and in anticipation of this will display behaviours (e.g. cowering; hiding) which we interpret as 'guilt' and assume that because of this behaviour he knows he has 'done wrong'. However, the dog is anticipating being told off when his/her owner comes home and looks and behaves in a particular way. The behaviours the dog is showing are actually motivated by fear and anxiety by what is about to happen.

Our survey suggested that the number of dog owners believing that their dogs could experience complex emotions was fairly high with nearly half of dog owners reporting that their dogs could feel guilt. This mismatch between the emotions which dogs can actually experience and what owners believe they can feel can pose problems.

Rather than us treating them as dogs and in ways which reflect their mental capacity, we may end up treating them as little people which has repercussions for how we react to their behaviours, manage, train and care for them as illustrated by the example above. It is entirely possible to love and care for a dog as if he/she were a family member but in ways which respect his/her biology and behaviour, but achieving this is likely to require many to think and behave differently towards the dogs in our home.



5 Conclusions

In general, our findings suggest that many of the dog owners we surveyed had a good understanding of what dogs need behaviourally and socially to be happy and healthy, with a high proportion agreeing or agreeing strongly with statements regarding company, exercise, play and training. In this regard, and based on our findings, the respondents appeared to be largely in tune with their dog's behavioural and social needs.

However, the knowledge held by the owners did not always appear to translate into their behaviour towards their dogs. As a result, while many owners had a level of understanding which suggests their dogs will be happy and healthy, their behaviour towards their dogs may fail to ensure this. As examples, during an average working day, more than one-fifth of dogs are reported to be left alone for more than four hours a day. Despite the range of services available to working dog owners, more than half of dogs were reported to stay at home indoors with only nine percent being walked and five percent being visited by someone else.

Respondents to our survey reported that their dogs displayed a range of behaviours that are commonly presented at behaviourists' practices, but a large proportion of the surveyed owners hadn't sought help despite some of the behaviours being indicative of a negative emotional state. When help was sought, sources varied but the most popular appeared to be the internet. There also appeared to be a lack of understanding around the mental capacities of dogs and how they learn. Emotions limited to humans were attributed to quite a large proportion of dogs and the way in which dogs were trained seem to be based on the assumption that dogs are able to think and understand in the same way we do.

The responses of owners to our survey suggest there is a mismatch between the level of knowledge about, and behaviour towards, dogs. The millions of dogs we share our homes with are reliant upon us for a lifestyle which provides for and accommodates their behavioural and social needs. This can only be achieved if owner knowledge and behaviour are consistent with an up-to-date and evidence based understanding of dog biology and behaviour, with veterinary, behavioural and dog care services available which complement this. It is very clear that any solutions are likely to be complex and multidimensional in nature. They will also require input from a range of stakeholders and fields; not just dog behaviour and welfare but human psychology and application of human behaviour change theory. Such a combination will be needed to ensure that solutions are fit for the intended purpose, matching the societal needs and accommodating any constraints which are likely to be present.

6 Moving forward

This report marks the launch of a new RSPCA campaign: #DogKind which aims to help owners be kind to their dog by better understanding and delivering their dog's social, behaviour and training needs. The results from this survey have identified three key outcomes:

- **Access to information which aids a standardised and up-to-date knowledge of dog welfare and behaviour among the general public.**
- **Solutions which drive and support real behaviour change, consistent with knowledge, which enables owners to provide their dog with a lifestyle that provides for its health and happiness.**
- **Access to dog services which are evidence based and up to date in their approach placing dog welfare first and foremost.**

The RSPCA's future activities and initiatives in support of the #DogKind campaign will be informed and guided by the findings of this survey and designed to achieve these outcomes such that all dogs are able to live happy, healthy and enjoyable lives.



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