



Cats as Companions: Can Cats Help Tackle Loneliness?

Executive Summary:

A report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Cats

June 2020



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Loneliness is defined as 'a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship'.⁶ APGOCATS welcomes the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's Loneliness Strategy,⁷ in which the Government has recognised it as a public health crisis in the UK, which it has sought to tackle through the Strategy.

The Strategy does not fully explore the potential of pet ownership, including cats, in playing a part in countering loneliness. Factors contributing to individual loneliness are complex. However, cat ownership or interaction can be part of a range of interventions in society which can tackle the feelings of isolation. It is essential the relationship will work for the individual and meet the cat's welfare needs.⁸

Loneliness has an impact on a large section of UK society and across every demographic. The UK Government's most recent survey shows that 23% of UK adults feel lonely often, always or some of the time,⁹ a 2% increase from the previous year.¹⁰ Whilst loneliness is often seen as something that affects the elderly, the UK Government's findings show that younger people (49 years and younger) are reporting higher rates of often or always feeling lonely, 22% compared to 15% for the elderly.¹¹

Research has begun into the potential benefits to society of pet ownership. Research conducted in the USA showed that 80% of pet owners stated that their pet made them feel less lonely, with 89% of owners who got a pet specifically to combat loneliness stating a benefit.¹²

To investigate further the extent to which cats have the potential to help tackle loneliness, APGOCATS conducted evidence sessions and attended the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Loneliness, hearing from four main groups:

- **Third sector** – evidence from third sector organisations who directly deal with people experiencing loneliness
- **Academic research** – evidence and research into pet/cat ownership and its effect on loneliness
- **Housing providers** – evidence on how types of housing provision, particularly the rental sector, affect people's ability to be a cat owner and get potential companionship to prevent or help tackle loneliness
- **Healthcare providers** – evidence on how the benefits cats can provide in terms of companionship and enhanced wellbeing can be integrated into models of social prescribing and into individual care assessments

Through these evidence sessions and information gathering, APGOCATS received a wealth of information identifying where there was existing research, isolated current research gaps, and identified where there was potential to explore and develop further how cats can help tackle loneliness.

APGOCATS recommends that the next steps should be to:

- **A pilot of cat ownership and interaction within a social prescribing context.** Currently companion animal ownership or interaction is not widely promoted as an option for social prescribing practitioners. APGOCATS believes it could provide genuinely beneficial results.

APGOCATS recommends that health, and social service practitioners, Local Authorities, the newly launched National Academy for Social Prescribing¹³ and Clinical Commissioning Groups pilot social prescribing models involving cats such as volunteering/fostering for an animal welfare charity or if appropriate for the individual, getting a cat as a pet. This should be done in collaboration with third sector organisations working in social prescribing to ensure feline welfare is considered alongside human wellbeing.

- **Improve the evidence base.** Most of the evidence showing a positive relationship between pet ownership and improving loneliness is piecemeal; there is limited academic research and still less that differentiates cats from other pets.

APGOCATS recommends that specific new academic, longitudinal research is commissioned by Government across a range of demographics and life stages to evidence how cats can help tackle loneliness in society. The research should involve health professionals and third sector organisations working with those at risk of or experiencing loneliness.

- **Enabling renters to own or foster a cat more easily.** Housing policy continues to be an issue where pet policies in the rental sector prohibit pet ownership. People are renting their homes in increasing numbers across the country, yet the availability of pet-friendly accommodation remains low. This means those living in rented accommodation who may benefit from the companionship of a cat are being denied the opportunity, with a stigma remaining among landlords reinforcing the negative stereotypes of pet-owning tenants. Pet-friendly rentals are generally more expensive and harder to find.

APGOCATS recommends that Government works in collaboration with private and social housing providers

and charities to explore ways of encouraging more cat-friendly tenancies - including a round table with landlord and tenant representatives.

- **Provision of information and advice about responsible cat ownership and its benefits.**

Information on the benefits of cat ownership is not always available to those experiencing loneliness and who may potentially benefit, particularly at significant times of life change.

APGOCATS recommends that the wealth of information on cat care, adoption, lifetime costs of a pet etc. that is provided by animal organisations is widely shared by agencies and professionals that work with those experiencing or at risk of loneliness. Government could play a co-ordinating role in this process.

- **Cats to be incorporated into health assessments and personalised care plans.** Under the Care Act 2014¹⁴ individuals requiring care can receive support for their wellbeing. However, provision for the care of someone's pets is not currently considered in care and support plans.

APGOCATS recommends Government ensures that assessments and personalised care plans include consideration of any companion animals that form part of the individual's household. Where an individual's care can be more suitably provided in a care home or retirement complex, provided the accommodation is suitable for a cat and there are clear protocols in place, APGOCATS recommends that residents are allowed to have a cat. To achieve this, APGOCATS urges Government to work closely with care home providers, retirement complexes and animal welfare charities.

⁶ Perlmán, D., & Peplau, L. A. (1981). 'Toward a Social Psychology of Loneliness', in R. Gilmour, & S. Duck (Eds.), *Personal Relationships: 3. Relationships in Disorder* (pp. 31-56). London: Academic Press

⁷ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/750909/6.4882_DCMS_Loneliness_Strategy_web_Update.pdf

⁸ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/45/contents>

⁹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/820610/Community_Life_Survey_2018-19_report.pdf

¹⁰ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/734726/Community_Life_Survey_2017-18_statistical_bulletin.pdf

¹¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/820610/Community_Life_Survey_2018-19_report.pdf

¹² <https://www.waltham.com/news-events/human-animal-interaction/pets-against-loneliness/5788/>

¹³ <http://www.socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/>

¹⁴ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/23/contents/enacted>



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