

Conference theme: Animal Welfare and Ethics

**New strategies and evaluation of canine post-adoption support**

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Dogs are handed to welfare charities for many reasons, including being found as strays after abandonment, or relinquished from homes due to unwanted behaviour. Dogs Trust, the UK's largest dog welfare charity, rehomes approximately 15,000 dogs annually. Not all rehoming is successful, however, because a portion of dogs are returned to the charity's care after adoption. Dogs Trust historically offered behavioural advice which was limited to an outbound support call within the first week and handling inbound queries. A new post adoption support initiative launched in April 2018 to provide a more proactive, targeted support framework and to collect data from owners on dog health and behaviour after adoption. The initiative involves increased telephone support and referral pathways, alongside an ongoing research project to evaluate its effectiveness. The objective of the telephone calls is to identify issues requiring support, improve customer experience, and reduce the number of dogs being returned. The objective of the research project is to assess the effect of increased support in reducing dogs being returned, and identify factors associated with the occurrence of problems in the home and with successful versus unsuccessful rehomes. Owners receive an outbound telephone call from a central response team approximately two days after adoption and can additionally opt-in to receive further calls at two weeks and four months after adoption. For each outbound call, owners answer a structured set of questions. Algorithms based on the responses to these questions trigger a task sent to the relevant specialist team to provide advice. If an owner's answer highlights a potential behaviour problem, they are called by a member of the behaviour team who give advice by telephone or refer them to another team for in-depth support, including referrals to a Clinical Animal Behaviourist. If a health problem is highlighted, owners can receive support from Dogs Trust veterinary professionals. The telephone calls are designed to provide welfare benefits for dogs by identifying problem behaviours before owners perceive them as a problem, offering behavioural advice to resolve them and ideally prevent escalation of issues which might result in a dog being returned. Adopting owners should also benefit from an improved human-animal bond, with associated mental and physical health benefits. The data will also provide the ability to examine how dogs' health and behaviour change over time after adoption, as there will be data available from multiple time points. The first step will be to report the frequency of common health and behaviour issues occurring at these time-points. A variety of outcome measures will be assessed, including owner reported incidence of specific health problems (e.g. vomiting, coughing), behaviour problems (e.g. separation related behaviours, aggression to people and/or dogs) and rates of dogs being returned after adoption. The data from this new initiative, once available, will therefore be used to inform and guide best practice within rehoming centres, leading to future dog and owner welfare benefits.