**Improving, and raising awareness, of pet acceptance in homeless accommodation**

**Evidence Review**

IMPACT Facilitator Project, England, 2025-26

Jessica Cleary, September 2025

# Abstract

This evidence review explores the role of companion animals in the lives of people experiencing homelessness (PEH) and the implications of pet ownership for service access and policy responses. A structured search identified 28 peer-reviewed studies, supplemented by additional relevant sources. Despite methodological limitations, the evidence is strikingly consistent across contexts. Findings indicate that pets play a crucial role in the well-being of PEH, offering companionship, emotional support, protection, motivation, and a sense of responsibility. These benefits can mitigate loneliness, reduce risky behaviours, and foster resilience. However, pet ownership also generates significant challenges. Chief among these are barriers to housing, healthcare, and support services due to widespread ‘no pets’ policies, compounded by stigma and misconceptions about animal welfare. While studies confirm that the health and behaviour of dogs belonging to PEH are often comparable to those of housed populations, discriminatory assumptions continue to underpin exclusionary practices. The literature highlights the importance of holistic, multi-level interventions that encompass policy reform, service redesign, public education, and further research.

**Key Words**: Homeless; People Experiencing Homelessness; Pets; Companion Animals

# Introduction

Homelessness remains a pressing social issue in the UK, with estimates suggesting more than 300,000 people are currently without a safe or secure home (Reynolds, 2018, The Big Issue, 2024). These figures include people sleeping rough, those in temporary or insecure accommodation, and the “hidden homeless” who are sofa-surfing or living in unsafe environments. Alongside this, Street Paws and other frontline organisations report that a significant minority of people experiencing homelessness (PEH) are also companion animal owners. International estimates suggest between 5% and 25% of PEH own a pet, most commonly dogs or cats (Cronley et al., 2009; Rhoades et al., 2015). While not a majority, this group represents a distinctive and often overlooked population with intersecting needs.

The experience of homelessness is already marked by precarity, stigma, and barriers to essential services. For those who own companion animals, these challenges are often compounded by difficulties in accessing accommodation, healthcare, and welfare support, alongside the responsibilities of animal care. At the same time, pets can provide profound psychological, emotional, and social benefits, sometimes described by PEH as lifesaving (Irvine, 2013; Cleary et al., 2020; Scanlon et al., 2021a). Understanding this duality - the benefits and the barriers - is essential for shaping responsive policy and practice.

This evidence review was commissioned to collate and assess the available international literature on the relationship between companion animals and homelessness. Informed by 28 academic sources spanning qualitative interviews, quantitative surveys, scoping and systematic reviews, and practice-focused reports, this review identifies consistent findings, points of divergence, and implications for policy, practice, and research.

# **Defining Concepts**

Two terms are important to clarify at the outset:

1. This review uses the term ‘*people experiencing homelessness’* (PEH) rather than ‘homeless people’. This framing recognises homelessness as a social and structural condition, rather than a fixed personal identity, and reflects wider best practice in research and service delivery.
2. The review recognises that both *pets* and *companion animals* are terms often used interchangeably across the literature. However, the concept of ‘companion animal’ has gained traction in recent years, as it more accurately conveys the depth of relational bonds between humans and animals, emphasising reciprocity and emotional connection rather than ownership (Walsh, 2009). This is especially relevant when describing the relationships of PEH, who frequently characterise their pets as family members, children, or sources of unconditional love.

# **Review Questions**

This review is structured around two core research questions (RQs):

RQ1 - What roles and impacts do companion animals have in the lives of people experiencing homelessness?

RQ2 - What are the implications of pet ownership for access to and engagement with homelessness services, including hostel provision and pet-friendly policy implementation?

Together, these questions aim to capture both the personal and relational significance of companion animals for PEH and the systemic and structural implications of companion animal ownership within homelessness contexts.

# Methodology

A structured, non-systematic literature search was carried out to identify peer-reviewed sources relevant to the intersections of homelessness and companion animal ownership. Searches were conducted in EBSCO, PubMed, and Google Scholar, using combinations of the following key terms: homelessness OR homeless OR housing AND companion animals OR pets. Only publications written in English were included, and no time limit was applied.

The search initially identified 27 records. After reading abstracts, six were excluded as not directly relevant (for example, those focusing solely on animal-assisted therapy in housed populations). Duplicates were also removed, leaving 21 unique sources. To strengthen coverage, a further seven papers were identified through citation tracking in the reviewed articles and were judged relevant enough to include. This brought the total to 28 peer-reviewed sources for review[[1]](#footnote-1).

# **Methodological Limitations**

It is important to acknowledge limitations in both the evidence base and this review. Much of the research included in this area is qualitative, small-scale, and context-specific, often drawing on convenience samples from particular shelters, services, or geographic areas. Quantitative studies are fewer, and those that exist frequently lack control groups or longitudinal designs. The systematic reviews included in the evidence base (e.g. Cleary et al., 2020; Conway, 2021; McCosker et al., 2024; Montgomery et al., 2024) all highlight similar methodological gaps in the existing data in this area.

Yet, despite these limitations, the evidence reviewed here is remarkably consistent across contexts and populations. Findings from North America, the UK, Australia, and Europe converge to present a coherent picture of the centrality of companion animals in the lives of PEH, as well as the structural barriers created by service exclusion. Despite substantially different social and legal systems in each country, the similarity of these findings infer a noteworthy level of generalisability.

This consistency across 28 sources provides a relative confidence in the reliability of the themes and implications identified below.

Findings: RQ1 - Role and Impact of Companion Animals

**Companionship**

Across the evidence base, companionship is consistently the most fundamental benefit of pet ownership for people experiencing homelessness (PEH). Studies from the UK, North America, and Australia repeatedly describe pets as “family,” “children,” or an “only friend” (Labrecque and Walsh, 2011; Irvine, 2013; Cleary et al., 2021; Garland-Lewis et al., 2024). Owners often used parental language, speaking of “raising” or “caring for” their dogs as they would children (O’Haire, 2010; Cleary et al., 2021; Schmitz et al., 2023).

Pets provided consistency amid disrupted human relationships caused by family breakdown, rejection, victimisation, or transient living arrangements (Irvine et al., 2012; Howe and Easterbrook, 2018). This reliability and unconditional love offered by animals was described as a unique form of kinship, often more dependable than human ties.

Subgroup findings deepen this picture: LGBTQ+ youth framed pets as integral to their chosen families, buffering the effects of discrimination and social exclusion (Schmitz et al., 2023). Women escaping domestic abuse reported pets as a safe emotional anchor and source of continuity amid dislocation (Labrecque and Walsh, 2011). Veterans and those with serious illness described pets as sustaining relational continuity where human support networks were absent (Ward et al., 2024). For homeless youth, dogs were their most reliable companion, described as “always there” and “best friends” (Rew, 2000; Lem et al., 2013).

Although some accounts mention the distress of anticipating pet loss or separation, the evidence overwhelmingly shows companionship as a stabilising, central, and protective relationship.

**Key message:** Companion animals are often perceived as irreplaceable relationships - kin, family, and anchors of identity - that provide stability across diverse groups of PEH.

**Emotion & Mental Health**

The mental health benefits of pet ownership among PEH are among the most robust findings in the evidence base. Quantitative studies consistently demonstrate lower rates of depressive symptoms and loneliness among pet owners compared to non-owners (Brewbaker, 2012; Rhoades et al., 2015; Lem et al., 2016). Qualitative accounts amplify this by showing how pets provide hope, joy, and a reason to live: owners described animals as “lifesavers” that deterred suicide or self-harm and provided daily motivation (Irvine, 2013; Garland-Lewis et al., 2024). Dogs were often described as helping to “keep me going” or giving a sense of purpose to face each day (Cleary et al., 2021).

Mental health benefits were not confined to adults. For young PEH, pets offered comfort against loneliness, emotional stability, and a sense of non-judgmental support that buffered them from the psychological strains of street life (Rew, 2000; Lem et al., 2013). For veterans, studies noted pets’ potential to reduce suicidality, though policy provision rarely accounted for their needs (Geller, 2022). Among seriously ill PEH, companion animals were reported to buoy emotional well-being and provide critical comfort during end-of-life care (Ward et al., 2024).

Challenges were also identified, but these were secondary to the positive evidence. Stress, worry, and anxiety often stemmed from the burden of securing food, veterinary care, or fear of forced separation (Lem et al., 2013; Garland-Lewis et al., 2024). Anticipatory grief, particularly as companion animals aged, was common (Scanlon et al., 2021a). Forced separation - whether to access healthcare, housing, or through loss - was frequently described as traumatic, comparable to bereavement (Howe and Easterbrook, 2018; Montgomery et al., 2024). Taken together, the literature suggests pets are a critical protective factor for mental health, though gaps in services amplify the stress of ownership.

**Key message:** Pets provide significant protective effects for mental health, enhancing resilience and wellbeing, but this is accompanied by heightened vulnerability to stress, grief, and trauma linked to potential or actual loss.

**Physical Health & Safety**

Evidence also highlights pet ownership with positive physical health benefits. Regular exercise through walking dogs was widely reported as leading to improved fitness, mobility, and more structured daily routines (Rew, 2000; Lem et al., 2013; Howe and Easterbrook, 2018). These daily responsibilities often gave owners a reason to remain active, mitigating some of the health risks associated with rough sleeping and supporting healthier lifestyle choices.

Companion animals also acted as survival aids - providing warmth and comfort in harsh physical environments. Across all participant age groups, PEH described their dogs as keeping them warm when sleeping rough, a crucial protective factor against exposure and cold-related health risks (Rew, 2000). In this way, companion animals were not only emotional companions but also a form of physical survival aid during periods of extreme weather.

At the same time, many owners described placing their companion animals’ physical needs above their own. Feeding animals before themselves was common, with some youth and adults reporting they went hungry so their dogs could eat first (Rhoades et al., 2015; Irvine et al., 2012). Owners also delayed or avoided medical care when it required leaving their companion animal unattended (Taylor et al., 2004; Rhoades et al., 2015), heightening their own health vulnerabilities. In this sense, companion animals promoted responsibility and nurturance but could also exacerbate risks by forcing difficult trade-offs between self-care and animal care.

It was also found that companion animals played an important role in safety and protection. Several studies reported that PEH viewed their animals, particularly dogs, as guardians who provided security in unsafe environments and deterred potential threats (Cronley et al., 2009; Kidd and Kidd, 1994). This protective function was valued highly, especially by women and youth, for whom safety concerns were acute (Labrecque and Walsh, 2011; Rew, 2000). Companion animals were thus simultaneously health-promoting companions and practical protectors in precarious environments.

**Key message:** Pets contribute to physical wellbeing and safety for people experiencing homelessness, though this often comes with trade-offs that can worsen owners’ own health risks.

grief, and trauma linked to potential or actual loss

**Behavioural Changes**

Companion animals were also found to influence PEH’s behaviour, often encouraging more responsible or prosocial conduct in several of the studies. PEH repeatedly reported that companion animals acted as a deterrent to substance use and crime, with owners consciously avoiding drugs, alcohol, or offending behaviours to protect their animals or remain with them (Cronley et al., 2009; Howe and Easterbrook, 2018; Lem et al., 2013). For young men, companion animals were linked to reduced drug use and avoidance of imprisonment (Lem et al., 2013). Some owners described companion animals as their motivation to seek or maintain housing, jobs, or sobriety (Garland-Lewis et al., 2024).

However, pet-ownership for those experiencing chronic homelessness was also found to restrict opportunities. Owners routinely declined accommodation or treatment where animals were excluded, even if this prolonged homelessness (Rhoades et al., 2015; Slatter et al., 2012). Several studies describe the ‘pet before self’ phenomenon, where individuals prioritised their animal’s welfare over their own health, housing, or income generation (Lem et al., 2013; Cleary et al., 2021). This sometimes meant turning down medical care, employment, or safe housing to avoid relinquishing companion animals. While this could prolong homelessness, the evidence suggests this reflects structural exclusion in services rather than a lack of responsibility among owners.

**Key message:** Pets often act as protective factors against destructive behaviours and motivate positive change but can also reinforce exclusion by limiting access to housing, treatment, or work.

health risks.

grief, and trauma linked to potential or actual loss

**Social Relationships**

Companion animals also mediated social interactions for PEH. Dogs in particular were described as “icebreakers” encouraging conversations with strangers, generating donations, and reducing stigma (Taylor et al., 2004; Kidd and Kidd, 1994). Some owners reported that people treated them with more kindness when accompanied by a companion animal (Kidd and Kidd, 1994; Brewbaker, 2012; Rhoades et al., 2015). Companion animals also contributed to group cohesion within housing support accommodation, with women reporting that shelter pets could unify residents and build community (Labrecque and Walsh, 2011).

However, negative social outcomes were also found, albeit less frequently. PEH with companion animals sometimes faced harassment, criticism, or pity from the public, with widespread assumptions that they were unfit carers for animals (Kerman et al., 2020; Maujean et al., 2024). Public opinion surveys on pet ownership amongst PEH revealed mixed attitudes: while most participants supported homeless people keeping pets, a substantial minority expressed strong opposition, believing PEH lacked the ability or right to care for animals (Maujean et al., 2024). Such perceptions reinforce stigma and can translate into restrictive service policies.

**Key message:** Pets both enable and constrain social relationships, reducing isolation and facilitating connection while simultaneously exposing owners to stigma and discrimination.

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**Impact on Animals**

Finally, a group of the resources reviewed considered the welfare of the animals themselves. Across veterinary and welfare studies, the evidence strongly refutes public assumptions of neglect. Dogs living with PEH were generally well cared for, healthy, and socially adjusted (Williams and Hogg, 2016; King et al., 2024). Compared to housed dogs, they were often fitter, less obese, and better socialised due to constant companionship and exercise. Owners frequently prioritised their companion animals’ needs above their own, including food and veterinary care (Rhoades et al., 2015; Irvine et al., 2012).

Challenges remained: cold weather, hazardous environments, and limited access to veterinary care posed risks (Geller, 2022). Outreach models such as Street Dog Coalition (US) have demonstrated significant impact in the published evidence available in tackling these challenges, but service provision in this area remains uneven (Geller, 2022; Kurkowski and Springer, 2024).

**Key message:** Companion animals of PEH are generally healthy and well cared for, but their welfare remains vulnerable to structural barriers such as shelter restrictions, lack of veterinary access, and forced separations.

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Findings: RQ2 – Implications for Services & Policy

**Barriers & Tensions**

Across the reviewed literature, a consistent theme was the structural barriers that prevent PEH with companion animals from accessing accommodation, services, and stability. The most immediate challenge is the widespread exclusion of companion animals from hostels and shelters (Singer et al., 1995). Studies in the UK and internationally show that people are frequently forced to choose between relinquishing their animal or remaining unsheltered, with most opting to stay with their companion animal despite the risks of rough sleeping (Labrecque and Walsh, 2011; Rhoades et al., 2015; Kerman, et al., 2019). Even where pet-friendly accommodation exists, provision is limited, often subject to conditions such as species, size, or behaviour, and policies vary widely between services (Scanlon et al., 2021b). This patchwork provision exacerbates uncertainty and creates further stress for owners already living precariously.

Barriers extend beyond accommodation. Health and social care services are often inaccessible due to restrictions on bringing pets into clinics, hospitals, and treatment facilities (Howe and Easterbrook, 2018; Ward et al., 2024). For those with serious illness, this can mean delaying care or refusing hospital admission rather than leaving a companion animal behind (Ward et al., 2024). Similarly, access to employment, education, and public transport is curtailed when people cannot safely leave or travel with their animals (Geller, 2022; Garland-Lewis et al., 2024).

These exclusions reinforce cycles of homelessness and compound stigma, with public disapproval of homeless pet ownership still widespread (Maujean et al., 2024). A central tension lies in perceptions of animal welfare: despite consistent evidence that dogs owned by PEH are generally healthy and well-socialised (Williams and Hogg, 2016; King et al., 2024), assumptions that they cannot provide adequate care persist. These stereotypes drive exclusionary policies and discourage services from adapting provision, even though research shows that companion animals offer stability, motivation, and therapeutic benefits to their owners (Scanlon et al., 2021a; Schmitz et al., 2023).

Taken together, these barriers reveal the systemic contradictions at play. Policies intended to support vulnerable groups often inadvertently exclude those with companion animals, undermining their health, safety, and chances of exiting homelessness. Addressing these tensions requires a shift from conditional, piecemeal provision towards systemic recognition of the human–animal bond as integral to both service engagement and recovery.

**Key message:** People experiencing homelessness with companion animals face entrenched barriers to housing, health care, and services, often being forced to choose between their pet and essential support. These exclusions, driven by restrictive policies and persistent stigma, perpetuate homelessness and undermine well-being, underscoring the urgent need for systemic change.

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**Multi-Level Implications**

A recurring finding across the reviewed literature is that the challenges and opportunities linked to companion animal ownership by PEH cannot be resolved at any single level of action. Companion animals shape decisions about housing, health, service access, and well-being in deeply interconnected ways. As such, the evidence indicates that meaningful progress requires coordinated strategies operating simultaneously at the policy, service, public, and research levels. Kerman et al. (2020)[[2]](#footnote-2) highlight this multilevel framing as essential: policy changes must remove structural barriers, service adaptations must provide practical and flexible options, public attitudes must shift to reduce stigma, and research must generate a stronger evidence base to inform practice. Without alignment across these levels, initiatives risk being piecemeal, unsustainable, or inaccessible to those who most need them. The following subsections explore the implications at each level.

**Policy**

At the policy level, the strongest message from the evidence is the urgent need to reform exclusionary rules that bar companion animals from housing and shelter. Across multiple studies, people consistently reported refusing services and accommodation if it meant giving up their animal (Labrecque and Walsh, 2011; Lem et al., 2013; Rhoades et al., 2015; Montgomery et al., 2024). These choices, while protective of the human–animal bond, prolong homelessness and can worsen the health of both PEH and their companion animals. The adoption of pet-inclusive housing policies was therefore a central recommendation found across the literature, moving policy towards recognising people and their pets as interdependent units rather than treating companion animals as disposable.

The evidence also outlines a toolkit of policy models for overcoming ‘no pet’ restrictions. These include: co-sheltering models where pets remain with owners; designated kennel spaces attached to shelters; and foster-care or temporary boarding schemes during crises (McCosker et al., 2024). Low-barrier Housing First programmes have integrated pet-friendly tenancy clauses as standard, while several studies call for reforms to private rental legislation to restrict or prohibit blanket “no pets” clauses (Kerman et al., 2020; McCosker et al., 2024). To support implementation, recommendations emphasise dedicated funding for veterinary provision in shelters, insurance frameworks to address liability concerns, and clear operational guidance for staff on managing health, safety, and allergy issues (Irvine et al., 2012; Geller, 2022). Taken together, these options show that pet-friendly policy is not a single model but a flexible set of approaches that can be adapted across housing systems with adequate political will and resourcing.

A further critical dimension is the integration of veterinary and human health support through a One Health approach. This model recognises that the health of humans and animals is closely intertwined and that barriers to care are often shared (Kerman et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2021). For PEH, research shows they are frequently more willing to seek help for their companion animals than for themselves (Ramirez et al., 2022). At the same time, many delay or avoid accessing essential medical treatment because services are not pet-friendly and they cannot leave their animals unattended (Geller, 2022; Ward et al., 2024). By coupling human health and social support services with veterinary care in the same venue, delivered by multi-agency teams, a One Health model overcomes these barriers: it allows both owner and pet to be treated together, fosters trust, and creates pathways into wider support. Examples include joint outreach clinics staffed by veterinarians, medical providers, and social workers, which have been shown to build engagement with PEH who might otherwise remain disconnected from mainstream systems (Geller, 2022; Ramirez et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2021). Embedding this model into homelessness policy frameworks would signal a systemic shift, recognising the human-animal dyad as a unit of care.

**Services**

At the service delivery level, the evidence highlights the importance of tailoring homelessness support to acknowledge the centrality of companion animals in the lives of many PEH. This requires both the adaptation of existing generalist services and the development of specialist provision. Services that exclude animals, whether intentionally or through omission, inadvertently exclude their owners, prolonging homelessness and exacerbating health inequalities (Labrecque and Walsh, 2011; Lem et al., 2013; Rhoades et al., 2015). Conversely, services that embrace pet-inclusive approaches create entry points for support and foster trust with otherwise hard-to-reach populations (Geller, 2022).

One strand of recommendations centres on the integration of veterinary care and human services, not only through formal One Health clinics but also through practical partnerships. Examples include mobile outreach units where veterinarians and social workers co-deliver care (Geller, 2022; Ramirez et al., 2022) and the embedding of veterinary volunteers within homelessness drop-in centres (Kurkowski and Springer, 2024). These approaches improve take-up of both human and animal health services, making them highly effective touchpoints for early intervention.

The literature also stresses the potential for social work and mental health services to draw more actively on evidence about the human–animal bond. Companion animals provide stability, responsibility, and hope, and services could harness this in therapeutic and case management approaches (Risley-Curtiss, 2010; Irvine, 2013; Schmitz et al., 2023). For example, practitioners might recognise a companion animal as a protective factor in suicide prevention or substance misuse recovery (Howe and Easterbrook, 2018; Ward et al., 2024). Mental health professionals are also encouraged to offer letters designating animals as emotional support animals, which can help clients navigate restrictive housing or institutional settings (Kim, 2019).

Another significant implication is the need to provide grief and bereavement support when people lose their companion animals. Pet loss among PEH has been described as profoundly traumatic, often comparable to the death of a close family member, and is associated with relapse into substance use, depression, or acute distress (Labrecque and Walsh, 2011; Howe and Easterbrook, 2018; Slatter et al., 2012). Services that anticipate this risk and offer crisis support or counselling around pet loss may help to mitigate its negative consequences.

Practical supports remain equally important. Studies consistently recommend the expansion of foster and boarding programmes to cover periods of hospitalisation, rehabilitation, or imprisonment (Geller, 2022; Garland-Lewis et al., 2024). Pet food banks, free veterinary clinics, and pet supply donations are already widespread but require better coordination with mainstream homelessness services to ensure they are accessible and consistent (Kurkowski and Springer, 2024). Similarly, information campaigns to raise awareness among PEH about available pet-friendly services are essential, as a lack of knowledge often prevents engagement (Kerman et al., 2020).

Overall, the service-level literature underscores that companion animals should not be treated as an obstacle to service delivery but as part of the solution. When services build in animal-related supports and acknowledge the human–animal bond, they not only meet the needs of companion animals but also unlock pathways for their owners to access housing, healthcare, and social reintegration. In doing so, services may also recognise animals as a broader source of therapeutic and social value, opening up new possibilities for support that extend beyond pet-owning populations to benefit other service users as well

**Public**

Public attitudes were found to significantly influence the political and service environments in which PEH, and their companion animals live. Several studies found that between a quarter and a half of the general population opposes pet ownership by homeless people, often citing assumptions about neglect or irresponsibility (Irvine et al., 2012; Maujean et al., 2024). These perceptions are not only stigmatising but demonstrably inaccurate: empirical studies consistently show that the health of dogs belonging to homeless people is comparable to or better than that of housed populations, with lower rates of obesity and fewer behavioural problems (Williams and Hogg, 2016; King et al., 2024). The persistence of stigma has tangible consequences, including harassment on the streets and resistance to pet-friendly service expansion (Rhoades et al., 2015; Garland-Lewis et al., 2024).

The literature points towards public education as a necessary intervention. Narrative-based approaches, such as Photovoice exhibitions, have demonstrated potential to change perspectives by showing the mutual care and resilience in these relationships (see Garland-Lewis et al., 2024 for a good example of this). Educational campaigns led jointly by homelessness and animal welfare organisations could highlight both the empirical evidence on pet health and the psychological benefits for owners (Kerman et al., 2020). Destigmatising narratives may also reduce hostility towards panhandling (street begging) with pets and foster broader community support for pet-friendly policies. Ultimately, public perception shifts are essential for creating the social and political will required to implement structural reforms.

**Research**

Finally, the evidence base about companion animal ownership among PEH remains fragmented. Prevalence estimates vary widely from 3–25% (Cronley et al., 2009; Rhoades et al., 2015; Howe and Easterbrook, 2018), reflecting differences in how populations are defined (street, shelter, or service users). This ambiguity has practical consequences: if the scale of need is unclear, policymakers and funders may underestimate the importance of pet-friendly provision.

Qualitative studies have offered some of the most powerful insights, highlighting the life-saving benefits and acute challenges of the human-animal bond (Irvine, 2013; Labrecque and Walsh, 2011; Schmitz et al., 2023). These accounts should not be undervalued, but their small-scale limits generalisability. A balanced agenda is needed that both deepens qualitative work with under-researched groups (e.g. LGBTQ+ youth, women fleeing domestic violence, veterans: Maharaj, 2016; Ward et al., 2024) and expands quantitative and longitudinal studies to explore outcomes and compare pet-owning and non-pet-owning populations.

A further gap is the lack of published evaluation of good practice. While examples exist of pet-friendly shelters, foster schemes, and One Health initiatives (Geller, 2022; Kerman et al., 2020; Garland-Lewis et al., 2024), few have been systematically studied, leaving provision patchy and lessons unshared. Publishing descriptive accounts and evaluative findings would support wider learning and strengthen the investment case.

There is also a geographic imbalance, with most studies based in North America and far fewer from the UK (Scanlon et al., 2021a; Howe and Easterbrook, 2018), raising concerns about applicability across welfare systems. Other underexplored areas include physical health impacts for companion animals and owners (King et al., 2024; Williams and Hogg, 2016), grief and loss support (Labrecque and Walsh, 2011; Howe and Easterbrook, 2018), and the potential of service animal accreditation to improve housing and healthcare access (Kim, 2019).

**Key message:** Evidence shows that supporting people experiencing homelessness with companion animals requires coordinated action across policy, services, public attitudes and research. Pet-friendly housing integrated with One Health approaches, stigma reduction and stronger evidence must work together; isolated interventions cannot address the systemic barriers that force people to choose between their pets and their own well-being. A holistic, multi-level response can move provision from patchy to sustainable, recognising the human–animal bond as a powerful source of resilience, responsibility and healing.

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Conclusion

This review has drawn together evidence from a range of sources exploring the role and impact of companion animals in the lives of PEH and the implications for policy and service provision. Across contexts and populations, the findings are remarkably consistent: companion animals provide vital companionship, emotional and mental health benefits, motivation, and protection, while also reinforcing responsibility and offering a buffer against loneliness and despair. Yet these benefits come at a cost, as pet ownership frequently restricts access to housing, health care, and wider support services due to entrenched exclusionary policies, public stigma, and structural barriers.

The literature highlights the need for holistic, multi-level responses. Policy reforms must prioritise pet-friendly housing and shelters; services should integrate veterinary and human support through One Health approaches and recognise the therapeutic value of the human–animal bond; public awareness campaigns are required to challenge stigma; and further research should address evidence gaps, particularly around good practice, using quantitative and longitudinal methods, and exploring the experiences of a more diverse range of PEH subgroups.

Overarchingly, what is clear from the existing literature in this area is that overcoming systemic barriers and building coordinated, compassionate responses is essential if services and policies are to reflect the lived realities of PEH and their companion animals. Recognising the human–animal bond not only honours the resilience of this population but also offers a pathway to more inclusive, effective, and humane approaches to tackling homelessness.

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1. These 28 sources are marked with an asterisk in the reference list to differentiate from other sources cited in this evidence review. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This source provides a very useful overview table of multi-level interventions that readers may find useful to review. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Those with asterisks are the 28 reviewed in depth for this review [↑](#footnote-ref-3)