

1 **‘She couldn’t leave them... the perpetrator had threatened to burn them alive’:**
2 **Domestic abuse helpline calls relating to companion animals during the COVID-19**
3 **pandemic**

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5 Running Head: Animals, Abuse and COVID-19 Lockdown

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Abstract

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25 Companion animals can both protect against, and increase risk for, coercive control and
26 abuse, yet have not been considered in existing UK COVID-19 reports of domestic abuse.
27 This study aimed to explore the nature and frequency of animal-related calls received by UK
28 domestic abuse helpline staff during the COVID-19 pandemic, examine any lockdown-
29 related changes, identify potential commonalities across helpline organisations, and explore
30 perspectives about ongoing animal-related issues in the context of domestic abuse. Semi-
31 structured virtual interviews were conducted with 11 domestic abuse helpline staff workers
32 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were subjected to thematic analysis. The analysis
33 revealed four overarching themes. Theme 1) Lockdown-related changes in the frequency and
34 nature of animal-related calls received. Theme 2) Animals as tools for abuse during
35 lockdown, with subthemes a) Manipulating the family-animal bond, and b) Fears over animal
36 safety. Theme 3) Animals as barriers to refuge during lockdown, with subthemes, a) Lack of
37 animal-friendly accommodation, b) Lack of social support systems, and c) Animals as coping
38 mechanisms. Theme 4) Helpline staffs' awareness of and links to animal friendly
39 accommodation and fostering services. The findings can inform decision making regarding
40 appropriate long-term support needs for multi-species families with complex needs, both
41 during and post-pandemic.

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43 **Key words:** Animal cruelty; Companion animals; COVID-19; Domestic abuse; Helplines

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Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and associated restrictions increased psychological difficulties and caused social disruption, exposing personal vulnerabilities associated with a myriad of risk factors including an increased risk for domestic abuse (Peterman et al., 2020; Sharma & Borah, 2020). Domestic abuse (DA) refers to psychological, emotional, sexual, physical, and financial abuse within the home, and is a world-wide public health problem (Ertan et al., 2020), described as a ‘double-pandemic’ during the COVID-19 lockdown (Bettinger-Lopez & Bro, 2020). Lockdown provided an enabling environment for diverse forms of abuse, such as using the virus as a scare tactic to threaten or isolate victims (Peterman et al., 2020). Enforced restrictions, such as ‘stay at home’ measures, have been used as a form of control over daily activities to minimise transmission of COVID-19. Stay at home orders simultaneously increased the opportunity to monitor and keep surveillance on victims by abusers, and social distancing has been used as a form of limiting victims’ access to social support systems (Women’s Aid, 2020). These lockdown measures enforced by the UK government resulted in victims finding themselves confined to their homes without respite from their abuser, reporting feeling ‘trapped’ and unable to access previously available safe spaces (Ivandic et al., 2020; Brodie et al., in preparation). Those who were receiving in-person professional support prior to the pandemic (such as individual or group counselling) were no longer able to access this support, and alternative virtual sessions may have been difficult to attend due to the abuser being in continued close contact with the victim. Consequently, the prevalence and severity of DA cases increased during the UK lockdown (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2020; Office for National Statistics, 2020). In the UK, a report by Women’s Aid (2020) found that 61% of female victims reported that their experience of abuse had worsened during lockdown, and 68% of female victims

70 reported to have had no one to turn to during lockdown. These findings were particularly true
71 for women living with their abuser. The same report found that 53% of female victims
72 reported an increase in children's exposure to DA, and 38% reported an increase in children
73 being direct recipients of abuse. With this increase, DA helplines (DAH) including audio
74 calls, webchat, and text messaging, became an important support platform in the absence of
75 access to previously available face-to-face or community-based support services. DAH
76 reported increased pressure during lockdown due to an increased level of service provision
77 needed. This was reflected through an increase in telephone calls received and through
78 increased traffic on DA websites, which were reported to increase by as much as 700%
79 (Refuge, 2020). Interviewing DAH staff about the calls they experienced during lockdown
80 therefore offered a novel and insightful window into potential lockdown-related changes in
81 experiences of abuse during lockdown.

82 It is important to consider that DA often co-occurs with other forms of family abuse and
83 within multi-species households, where companion animals (often referred to as "pets") are
84 also at-risk of harm. Animal cruelty (AC) is often prevalent in homes where DA and other
85 forms of abuse are also present (Faver & Cavazos, 2007) and research has found that rates of
86 co-occurrence of DA and AC are between 25-86% (Monsalve et al., 2017). Perpetrators of
87 abuse, who have also been cruel to animals, have been found to be more controlling,
88 dangerous, and violent, and utilise a wider range of abusive techniques (Simmons &
89 Lehmann, 2007). AC is now viewed as a 'red flag' for abuse and physical violence toward
90 other family members (DeGue & DiLillo, 2009; Faver & Strand, 2003), and in recent years,
91 there have been efforts to train veterinarians to identify and report cases of suspected AC, in
92 effort to safeguard both people and animals at-risk for abuse (Alleyne et al., 2019). Moreover,
93 the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act (2018) recognises AC as a form of abuse and so efforts
94 have been made to offer animal fostering services for women seeking refuge.

95 The strong emotional bonds that individuals form with their companion animals often
96 comprise of the same attachment features observed in human-human attachment
97 relationships, such as seeing their pet as a safe-haven, deriving support and comfort from
98 them, seeing their pets as a secure base, seeking closeness and proximity to their pet, and
99 feeling distressed when separated (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011). However, these attachments are
100 often used as a platform within DA for furthering abuse and control. Threats to harm
101 companion animals are common to intimidate, induce fear and submission in DA victims,
102 and are used as tools for the exertion of power and control, especially when victims are
103 highly attached to that animal (Allen et al., 2006; Arkow, 2014). Many DA victims (rates
104 vary but are as high as 71%) report that their abuser has hurt or has killed their companion
105 animal (Flynn, 2000a; Riggs et al., 2018). Witnessing AC can cause significant distress for
106 victims, increasing risk for long-term psychological harm, and associations between
107 witnessing AC and future engagement in AC behaviour, i.e., ‘the link’, has also been found
108 (Bright et al., 2018).

109 Companion animals are often used as ‘coercive devices’ preventing victims from leaving, or
110 coercing victims to return to the abuser after they have fled (Arkow, 2014). Animals can
111 therefore be a barrier for refuge with many victims delaying shelter or remaining within their
112 abusive relationship due to fears over the safety of their animal if they were to leave (Taylor
113 & Fraser, 2019; Taylor et al., 2019). It is important to note however, that witnessing AC can
114 also be an impetus for fleeing DA (Rosenberg et al., 2020). Due to the increase in reports of
115 human-directed abuse during the COVID-19 lockdown, it is feasible to predict that the
116 prevalence and severity of abuse directed toward companion animals within the home could
117 have also increased, however, current existing UK reports have not reported on such issues.

118 Although companion animals are often used as tools for abuse, they can also play an
119 important role in one’s experience of abuse, offering victims a sense of emotional support

120 and comfort and a ‘safe-haven’ (Flynn, 2000a, 2000b). Animals can have therapeutic
121 potential, being important coping mechanisms during times of adversity, especially for
122 vulnerable populations, increasing resilience, and buffering against the development of
123 psychopathology (Cameranesi et al., 2021; Hawkins et al., 2019; Taylor & Fraser, 2019).
124 Animals can increase a sense of social connection, preventing feelings of loneliness and
125 social isolation that may have been particularly important when social distancing measures
126 were in place (Oliva & Johnston, 2021). In the general population, companion animals were
127 found to mitigate some of the detrimental psychological effects of the COVID-19 lockdown
128 (Ratschen et al., 2020). Animals can therefore be important for coping and recovery
129 following adversity (Applebaum et al., 2021). It is therefore also important to consider the
130 potential ‘protective’ role of companion animals for victims experiencing DA during
131 lockdown, and so far, this has not been considered in existing empirical studies carried out
132 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

133 This study therefore aimed to explore the nature and frequency of animal-related calls
134 received by UK DAH staff during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to examine any lockdown-
135 related changes in such calls and identify potential commonalities across DA organisations.

136

137 **Method**

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139 **Research Design, Recruitment, and Participants**

140 The current study is part of a larger three phase UK-wide investigation into experiences of
141 DA during the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspectives of both DAH staff, and directly
142 from victims, using a mixed-method approach comprised of 1:1 virtual interviews, and an
143 anonymous survey. Ethical approval was granted by the Universities Ethics Committee

144 [2020-13927-12150]. This qualitative study reports the results from the 1:1 virtual interviews
145 with DAH staff (phase one of the study). Participants were 11 DA helpline staff who were
146 recruited through adverts sent to them by their organisation. This number is deemed adequate
147 for achieving data saturation in qualitative designs. Interested participants could contact the
148 researchers if they were interested in taking part in the interview and so were self-selected.
149 There was no pressure or expectation for staff to take part, and individuals remained
150 anonymous. The DA organisation was not informed if one of their staff members
151 participated. Participants were recruited from a diverse range of DA organisations across the
152 UK, but names of such organisations are omitted for anonymity. Participants were fully
153 informed about the purpose of the study through an online information sheet before deciding
154 whether to participate. Participants could request the interview schedule in advance.
155 Recruiting through the DA organisations meant that participants had access to a named
156 wellbeing support contact through their organisation if needed. In total, 10 female and one
157 male participant were interviewed who were aged between 24 and 56; most were located in
158 Scotland (n=9), one participant was located in London, and one participant worked UK-wide
159 (specific location was not provided). Time spent working within the organisation ranged from
160 six months to six years. Full description of the participants can be found in Table 1.

161

162 **Data Collection and Analysis**

163 Participants were asked to sign an electronic consent form prior to the interview. Interviews
164 were conducted remotely using video software (Microsoft Teams) lasting no more than 60
165 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Participants were
166 debriefed verbally at the end of the interview. Participants received a £10 Amazon voucher as
167 a thank you for taking part. Data was collected between January and May 2021 during the

168 COVID-19 pandemic and most interviews were carried out during the second full UK-wide
169 lockdown with stay-at-home restrictions lifting in April 2021. DAH staff reflected upon calls
170 received since the first UK-wide lockdown in March 2020 up until their most recent call. The
171 full interview schedule comprised of 27 questions relating to the nature and frequency of calls
172 received during COVID-19 lockdown, that aimed to identify any potential COVID-19 related
173 changes in these calls. The interview questions were split into four key sections, section one
174 focused on general abuse-related calls, section two related to calls (if any) relating to
175 companion animals within the home, section three related to children (if any) within the
176 home, and section four related to the helpline staff's own coping and wellbeing, and support
177 received during the pandemic. For the current study, only data relating to companion animals
178 were analyzed and reported. If a participant reported that they had received calls relating to
179 companion animals, they were asked follow-up questions regarding the frequency and nature
180 of these calls, and whether they felt that these types of calls had changed in any way during
181 the COVID-19 lockdown.

182 Data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008), a widely used
183 inductive and meticulous analytical approach that is data-driven and involves the evaluation
184 of data, interpretation and concluding. This analysis method aims to identify common and
185 recurring themes that are refined through a collaborative and iterative approach. All
186 researchers are involved in the analysis process that is comprised of several stages: 1)
187 familiarization of the data, 2) the production of initial codes, 3) collating codes into potential
188 themes, 4) reviewing and refining themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) selecting
189 quotes that represent each theme and producing the report.

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Results

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193 The analysis identified four overarching themes: Theme 1) Lockdown-related changes in the
194 frequency and nature of animal-related calls received; Theme 2) Animals as tools for abuse
195 during lockdown, with the subthemes a) Manipulating the family-animal bond, and b) Fears
196 over animal safety; Theme 3) Animals as barriers to refuge during lockdown, with the
197 subthemes, a) Lack of animal-friendly accommodation, b) Lack of social support systems,
198 and c) Animals as coping mechanisms; and Theme 4) Helpline staffs' awareness of and links
199 to animal friendly accommodation and fostering services. Companion animals are often
200 referred to as "*pets*" by the DAH staff.

201

202 **Theme 1: Lockdown-Related Changes in the Frequency and Nature of Animal-Related**
203 **Calls Received**

204 This theme captured helpline staffs' perceptions about potential lockdown-related changes in
205 the frequency and nature of calls received that mentioned animals, and captured perceptions
206 about any potential changes and/or commonalities in caller characteristics and types of
207 animals mentioned during these calls. First, there were variations in reported frequencies of
208 animal-related calls received during lockdown. Female-focused organisations reported to
209 have received the most animal-related calls and so most, if not all, animal-related calls
210 received by DAH staff were from female callers. However, participant 3, who worked for an
211 organisation targeted at both male and female callers, reported to have received more animal-
212 related calls from females, "*I think just- definitely every call I'm talking about has been a*
213 *woman caller*". For participants 1 and 8 who worked for male-focused organisations, no
214 animal-related calls were received during lockdown. However, participant 8 mentioned that
215 they had experience of such calls in the past when working at a female-focused organisation:

216 *[...] I worked on (organisation name omitted), which was very much more female*
217 *victims, and cruelty to animals would come up when we were talking about a male*
218 *perpetrator. But now on the male helpline that doesn't come up as much. To be*
219 *honest, I can't think of a single call I've had at where a man has mentioned a woman*
220 *being cruel to an animal (P8).*

221 The other nine participants all reported that they had received animal-related calls during
222 lockdown, but the frequency of these calls varied between organisations. For example,
223 participant 3 (all genders) reported that animal-related calls were “*always outliers those*
224 *calls... I can almost count them on my two hands, like when someone goes into detail about*
225 *that*”, and participant 5 (male-focused) and participant 6 (all genders) reported to have
226 received “*a few*” calls. Animal-related calls were, however, much more common for the
227 other participants such as for participant 2, “*that is something that is quite common. Probably*
228 *on the shifts I do, probably one every couple of days, that pets are used as part of abuse*”,
229 and for participant 11, “*I'd say that a large majority who we support have pets... a lot of the*
230 *time there are animals, and they are abused as well*”.

231 Two participants, 7 and 11, reported to have received more calls relating to children in
232 lockdown compared to animals. There seemed to be uncertainty amongst DAH staff with
233 regard to potential changes in frequencies of animal-related calls, with most feeling that there
234 had been no change since pre-pandemic. Participant 6 and 10 however, felt that there may
235 have been an increase in animal-related calls, but they were not confident in this:

236 *I hadn't really discussed pets before the pandemic so to discuss pet during the*
237 *pandemic is definitely different. Yeah, there was an increase... and there have been a*
238 *few more animal related cases come through. It's assault to the person, threatening*

239 *abuse to the person and then also there is an animal charge in there. So there have*
240 *been a few more come through the past year (P6).*

241 *To be really honest, I haven't heard a lot about pet abuse. That was new to me about*
242 *the young girl and her being abusive to the cat. So that was a new thing for me. So,*
243 *actually maybe it has been more frequent because that was the first time I'd hear*
244 *about something like that (P10).*

245 Across participants it seemed that the animal-related issues and concerns raised by callers had
246 not changed compared to pre-pandemic. Participant 2 reported that they had received more
247 animal-related calls during lockdown, but this may have been due to receiving more DA calls
248 in general, and the nature of these calls had not changed, *"I don't think in terms of actual*
249 *content, it's just we've had more calls, so it has come up more often"*, and participant 5 could
250 not recall if the nature of these calls had changed, *"... it's very difficult to know if there were*
251 *any changes. I think from the few cases that I can recall, there were no changes"*. Across
252 participants there was a general view that the nature of the animal-related calls was similar to
253 those received pre-pandemic and that these mostly related to concerns about access to
254 animal-friendly accommodation (covered in more depth within Theme 4) as described by
255 participant 5:

256 *It was very much the normal issues 'will accommodation providers be able to accept*
257 *pets?'. For example, a refuge service or if they're looking for private accommodation,*
258 *and, you know, some landlords are not happy with people to have pets. Those were*
259 *the same issues as before; they didn't seem to be anything different (P5).*

260 Regarding the types of companion animals mentioned during the calls, dogs and cats were the
261 most common, as described by participant 11:

262 *Dogs and cats are the main ones, and they are ones who women really don't want to*
263 *go without. So, no matter how dire the situation is, if they can't bring a dog or a cat*
264 *with them then they wouldn't leave (P11).*

265 Dogs and cats were used as tools for abuse, as described in more detail within the next theme.

266

267 **Theme 2: Animals as Tools for Abuse During Lockdown**

268 This theme encapsulates companion animals being used as tools for abuse, a method of
269 exerting control and coercion over the victim, especially when the victim is emotionally
270 bonded to the animal, as described by participants 4 and 11:

271 *Abusers will also use the animal as a way to control a family and control a woman*
272 *and threatening abuse to the animal or threatening to remove the animal. And so, we*
273 *hear that a lot (P4).*

274 *When we risk assess women that's one of the questions that we asked them about the*
275 *perpetrator's behaviour towards animals, and it is quite common for the perpetrators*
276 *to – I hear that more so with dogs - to be physically abusive to the dog. It seems to be*
277 *kind of- like they will do it as it will further upset the woman because they know that*
278 *the woman cares a lot about the pet. Sometimes they will do it because they seem to*
279 *have lost their temper and the pet happens to be in their way. But definitely if there's a*
280 *pet in the house and if there is an abusive person, then I'll put my money on that*
281 *they've been abusive to the animal as well (P11).*

282 Calls received by DAH staff during lockdown often mentioned direct harm toward the
283 animal. Participant 3 for example, mentioned that they had callers who “*are absolutely clear*
284 *from what the perpetrator has said that he will hurt the animals*” and that these calls were

285 quite frequent, “*someone speaking about a dog and the perpetrator being violent towards the*
286 *animal... if I think about it, that's quite common*”. Participant 10 mentioned that direct harm
287 could be a form of retaliation, “*similar to children, they will kick the dog just to get back at*
288 *the women*”. Even in the absence of previous direct animal harm, the threat alone was a form
289 of abuse, and was enough to cause distress to the victim, as described by participant 7,
290 “*...even the threat – we hear that a lot, you know, ‘he threatened to harm the animal’*”, “*...If*
291 *he can be cruel to a pet, or even the threat of being cruel to a pet, is a way of having power*
292 *over somebody*”. This was further described participants 10 and 11:

293 *They may not even hit the dog but threaten to. So again, they are controlling the*
294 *situation by threatening to hit the dog. Or even the women may think it could happen.*
295 *The perpetrator may not have said they will, but the women knows that it could*
296 *happen (P10).*

297 *There are other times where women may say that the perpetrator hasn't harmed the*
298 *dog but the women knows that they could and so they get quite upset about that, you*
299 *know. So, even though a perpetrator may not have harmed the dog, the threat of that*
300 *is there and it is on a woman's mind (P11).*

301 Therefore, animals were viewed by DAH staff as ‘indicators of risk’ for violence, “*animals*
302 *are definitely an indicator of the level of risk probably more than anything else*” (P7), and a
303 ‘warning sign’ as described by participant 10:

304 *We do a test, the police do it as well, and it's just safe-guarding questions. There are*
305 *twenty-four questions, and one of them is ‘has he ever harmed an animal or pet?’.*
306 *That is one of the red flags that we see. If they say yes then that is really quite high*
307 *risk... animals are kind of one of the warning signs, if they have been harming*
308 *animals (P10).*

309 Animals were also, in some cases, reported to have been used as a 'post-separation weapon',
310 a tool of abuse even when the victim had already fled, as described by participants 3 and 4:

311 *There was actually also another one that was where the relationship had broken*
312 *down and it was a cat, and the cat was the perpetrators, but the woman had been*
313 *involved in like really looking after it. The perpetrator wasn't interested and didn't*
314 *bother. And the perpetrator had cut the cord and it was basically a way of punishing*
315 *her and emotional abuse... wasn't letting her get near the cat, and she was really*
316 *worried that he wasn't going to feed it, that it was going to be neglected and that was*
317 *kind of a way of controlling her (P3).*

318 *It's a big issue for women. In terms of animals being used to continue abuse... It can*
319 *be used after the relationship ends, you know somebody takes a dog or threatens to*
320 *take the dog or wouldn't return the dog and don't let you see the dog (P4).*

321 These quotes point to the emotional bond that victims have with their companion animal, and
322 how this bond has been used as a tool for furthering the abuse. This manipulation of the
323 human-animal bond is covered in more detail within the next sub-theme.

324

325 **Theme 2 Subtheme A: Manipulating the Family-Animal Bond**

326 This theme encompassed reports about animals being used as a manipulation tool, not just for
327 female victims, but for the whole family. Animals were used as a method of exerting control
328 and power over all family members by using their emotional bond with the animal as a
329 springboard for abuse, as described by participant 4:

330 *[...] and that's actually one of the biggest signs of domestic abuse and one of the*
331 *biggest issues in terms of domestic abuse is when there's an animal in the house, and*

332 *the animals are used to control the whole family because the whole family is in love*
333 *with a dog and it's a member of the family, and it will be used to continue the abuse,*
334 *either being hit and threatened or just the threat of the animal being put down or*
335 *taken away or been hurt (P4).*

336 Often this form of abuse was directed at the children within the home, as described by
337 participant 10, “*a lot of kids may say ‘dad hit the dog’ . So they are controlling the whole*
338 *situation. So yeah pets are a big part of their life*”, and participant 2 reflected upon animals
339 being used as emotional blackmail:

340 *It is something that can be used as a reward for them, but then also used as a threat*
341 *after that reward. And, you know, most compassionate people, even if they're not*
342 *particularly into animals, don't want to see an animal being hurt and abusers know*
343 *that... that sort of thing of like ‘you've been good, and I've bought you this puppy,*
344 *continue to be good or I'll hurt the puppy’ .*

345 Participant 7 reflected upon one particular call they had received where a dog was used to
346 inflict emotional harm onto a child:

347 *One story – and it was heart breaking – was that he kept the dog. Wife and the kids*
348 *had moved out without the dog, and they met up for child contact, and she said to him,*
349 *‘look, (son) really wants the dog, can we just take the dog with us for the weekend?’ ,*
350 *and he agreed initially and arranged to do it the next weekend, and then in the*
351 *meantime he just gave the dog away to one of his mates. You know, the cruelty in that*
352 *to the child was just unmistakable.*

353 Children’s exposure to animal cruelty was a concern for some callers. For example,
354 participant 10 talked about a call they had received where the mother of a young girl was
355 concerned over her exposure and imitation of animal cruelty behaviour:

356 *I know one situation where the daughter was in the house and the mum was worried*
357 *because the daughter was being horrible to the cat. She was having contact with the*
358 *dad. So, it was as if his behaviour was rubbing off on her because she was nasty to*
359 *the cat. She the mum has had to watch her to make sure she isn't being horrible... But*
360 *yeah, this wee girl was taking it out on the animal, and she had no other way of*
361 *letting those feelings go. That is the first-time I'd heard of a child harming a pet. But*
362 *like everything else I've said, it probably happens without us knowing. Like women*
363 *will usually not tell us stuff, but we can speculate that that is happening, or this is*
364 *happening, you know.*

365 These quotes illustrate that threats to harm or remove an animal can instill fear into the
366 victims. Fear over the safety of animals was a significant barrier to leaving; this is covered in
367 more detail within the next sub-theme.

368

369 **Theme 2 Subtheme B: Fears Over Animal Safety**

370 This theme largely encapsulated callers fears over the safety of their animal, and how this
371 was a significant barrier to leaving, “*I can't leave because I can't leave this animal' either*
372 *because it means so much to them or because they are genuinely worried about what would*
373 *happen to the animal*” (P2). This was exacerbated in cases where the abuser had inflicted
374 direct harm onto the animal in the past, “*so there's the sense that 'I can't leave because the*
375 *perpetrator is going to hurt it*” (P3). These fears left victims feeling trapped with their
376 abuser, as described by participants 3 and 4, “*those callers will generally feel completely*
377 *trapped like they can't go anywhere*” (P3), “*they feel as though they're not going to be able to*
378 *remove themselves from the situation*” (P4). Participant 3 further reflected upon how even

379 when the situation had escalated and became more dangerous, callers still refused to ‘leave
380 their animal behind’ because of the threats from the abuser:

381 *Recently I spoke to someone who, things were getting very desperate, but she felt that*
382 *she was trapped because of her pets, her cats, and she felt like she couldn’t leave*
383 *them because the perpetrator had threatened to burn them alive.*

384 Victims therefore stayed to ensure that their companion animals were safe. Animals as
385 barriers to refuge is described in more detail within the next theme.

386

387 **Theme 3: Animals as Barriers to Refuge During Lockdown**

388 Commonly reported across DAHs was that companion animals were barriers to refuge.

389 Victims were reluctant to leave if they were unable to take their animal with them, both due
390 to their bond and their reliance on the animal emotionally, and due to their concerns over the
391 safety and welfare of their animal, as described by participants 3 and 11:

392 *If the person has mentioned pets, that will be the reason that they aren’t leaving. Like*
393 *they do want to leave. They do feel that the situation is dangerous, and they want to*
394 *get out... and it’s sort of that sense of like I cannot leave without it like that’s not an*
395 *option (P3).*

396 *For a lot of women, they say that they would rather stay in their situation and know*
397 *that their dog or cat is safe, than go into a refuge and not have their dog or cat with*
398 *them... because for a lot of women that’s their only consistent thing in their life, and*
399 *it’s what they know, and they have had these animals for a long time. They also don’t*
400 *want further abuse to be put onto the animal when they leave. So, I’d say it’s a huge*
401 *barrier for women (P11).*

402 DAH staff reported that victims were more likely to leave if they had access to animal
403 friendly accommodation and so can take their animal with them, but this was not always
404 possible. This is described in more detail within the next sub-theme.

405

406 **Theme 3 Subtheme A: Lack of Animal-Friendly Accommodation**

407 DAH staff reported that victims were reluctant to, or had refused to leave, if they were unable
408 to take their animal with them into accommodation, “*not many refugees are equipped to*
409 *receive pets. Or if they are then it is on a case-by-case basis*” (P2), “*they often decide not to*
410 *leave the relationship because they will have to leave their pet*” (P10). This lack of access to
411 animal-friendly housing was therefore a significant barrier for victims, as described by
412 participants 6 and 11:

413 *So, they want to leave the partner, but they've got an animal, and a lot of shelters*
414 *won't let them bring the dog along, won't let them bring the cat along. So, yeah, that*
415 *has been an impact for some of the people that I've spoken to. They don't know where*
416 *they can go because they have an animal so they can't leave because of the dog* (P6).

417 *For most women, when they hear there might be a chance that they may not be able to*
418 *bring the dog, then the conversation stops there, and they look for other housing*
419 *options... Unfortunately, it puts a lot of women off and they say 'well, I'm not leaving*
420 *my dog or my cat'* (P11).

421 In some cases, DAH staff had links to animal foster care services. However, not all animals
422 were able to be fostered, as described by participant 10:

423 *People have totally turned down refuge or support. One woman had three dogs and*
424 *we were going to give them to foster care but they hadn't had all their injections so*

425 *we can't always give them or take them in for that reason. So, no matter what we did*
426 *we couldn't get this lady to come into refuge.*

427 DAH staff reported that not all callers were aware of what support was available in terms of
428 fostering services and animal-friendly accommodation, which acted as a barrier to seeking
429 support, as described by participant 3, "*in their mind they're already sort of feeling like they*
430 *can't get help, like they're not going to find help that's suitable for them because of their*
431 *animals*", and by participant 7:

432 *I think, unless they know- you know for example, that we take pets in certain*
433 *circumstances, they make the assumption that 'there's too many things against me*
434 *making this big decision'. 'I just don't know how to do it'. Making that first contact*
435 *with us is so difficult for most people.*

436 Some of the animal-related calls received by DAH staff during lockdown related to service
437 animals, and callers feeling unable to leave because of their reliance on, and bond with their
438 service animal, or being unsure whether there was accommodation available that would allow
439 them to stay together, as described by participant 2, "*that has come up on a couple of calls as*
440 *well where women aren't sure where they would go because they need their service dog*",
441 and by participant 7:

442 *I have had a couple of calls where it has been service dogs as well, where they are*
443 *like it's not just that you have an emotional bond that this is my pet, but this is an*
444 *animal that you need to function.*

445 However, some organisations only allow service or therapy animals, "*we only let in pets if*
446 *it's therapy pets*" (P11). In addition to a lack of animal-friendly housing available for victims,
447 callers may not have social support systems in place, or anyone they could rely on for their
448 animal's care; this is described in more detail within the next sub-theme.

449

450 **Theme 3 Subtheme B: Lack of Social Support Systems**

451 This sub-theme reflected callers lack of social support systems, such as having friends or
452 family who could take care of their animals if they were to leave their abuser. This was often
453 due to the COVID-19 restrictions in place, such as stay-at-home orders and social distancing,
454 but this sense of isolation was also due to the abuse itself, as described by participant 3:

455 *If a caller was isolated, and not because they're in lockdown, but because of the*
456 *abuse, and they had moved to an area where they specifically didn't have any friends.*
457 *And, like there wasn't anyone that they could leave animals with if they did leave.*

458 Even when callers did have social support systems in place, these contacts may not have been
459 able to take care of the animal, “*and other family members can't always take the animal. I*
460 *know one person whose dad has COPD so he couldn't take the pets*” (P10). Even when
461 social support was available, victims wanted to remain with their animals due to their reliance
462 on them for comfort and coping, as described in more detail within the next sub-theme.

463

464 **Theme 3 Subtheme C: Animals as Coping Mechanisms**

465 This theme encapsulates the strong emotional bond that victims have with their companion
466 animals, relying on these animals for emotional support. For example, participant 3 reflected
467 upon how animals are significant for victims' ability to cope with their abuse:

468 *[...] and definitely the significance of the pet to their coping and surviving. So,*
469 *there's the sense that 'I can't leave because the perpetrator is going to hurt it', but*
470 *there's also this like deep deep loyalty and love of like 'part of my surviving this*
471 *terrible situation has been this pet' (P3).*

472 This bond meant that victims would stay with their abuser so they could care for their animal,
473 “like a kind of ‘oh my, I owe a lot to it and that part of why I need to look after it and make
474 sure it is okay” (P3). DAH staff reported that even in cases where foster care was available,
475 victims still refused to leave because they did not want to be separated from their pet, as
476 described by participant 10:

477 *[...] we have foster care for pets, but most people don’t want to put them into foster*
478 *care. It’s a shame because sometimes we have everything in place yet when they hear*
479 *that they can’t have their pets with them then they decide not to go ahead with the*
480 *refuge place. I don’t blame them. I’m not saying they are making the wrong choice by*
481 *not fleeing, but it shows how attached people are to their pets (P10).*

482 It therefore seems important that DAH have awareness of, and links to animal friendly
483 accommodation where victims and their animals can stay together; this is described in more
484 detail within the next theme.

485

486 **Theme 4: Helpline Staffs’ Awareness of and Links to Animal Friendly Accommodation** 487 **and Fostering Services**

488 This final theme reflects DAH staffs’ awareness of, and links to, animal friendly
489 accommodation and foster care services. Most of the DAH staff interviewed did report to
490 have such links, and these services seemed to remain in operation during lockdown, “we do
491 link into pet services, my understanding was that some of those were still operating around
492 the country” (P5). For example, participant 10 talked about their organisation’s reliance on
493 foster care services for supporting victims in fleeing:

494 *We can’t force people into refuge, we can only do so much. I mean we have a really*
495 *good connection with our foster carers for pets. They really do look after the pets so*

496 *well. I mean I don't really know what we would do without them. Because, you know,*
497 *some people do give their pets up and come into refuge and are then able to get them*
498 *back once they have started their new life or something, you know.*

499 Participant 7 reported to have arranged animal-friendly accommodation in-house, and to have
500 made exceptions to allow victims and their animals to stay together:

501 *We were noticing it so much at one point that we actually just let families bring their*
502 *pets in with them. We just thought, you know we've all got dogs, cats and all sorts of*
503 *animals and we thought as long as we risk assess it, and we haven't had any problems*
504 *so far and it actually improves the atmosphere of the building. I think it normalizes it,*
505 *because one of the things that we try to not have is a controlling atmosphere in our*
506 *building where there's lots of exclusions and rules and stuff like that because that's*
507 *what people come away from.*

508 Similarly, participant 10 reported that their organisation “*have made allowances and try bend*
509 *the rules a wee bit*” and “*do our best to work around it because at the end of the day we want*
510 *people to be safe*”. Participant 11 also reported that some refuges will make exceptions to
511 support victims, “*they will assess a woman and her recovery. So, if she isn't going to recover*
512 *without a dog and the dog is no hassle, then I think nine out of ten times they are allowed to*
513 *bring the dog*”. Not all DAH staff interviewed however, had direct links to animal-friendly
514 accommodation, but most were aware of services that did exist that they could sign post their
515 callers to, such as Dogs Trust and Cats Protection League, as reported by participant 9, “*we*
516 *don't take animals in, but we are aware of the Dog's Trust and the Cats Protection League,*
517 *they'll foster animals if women are fleeing domestic abuse, and they're in temporary*
518 *accommodation*”, and by participant 11:

519 *[...] they [Dog's Trust] are really good. We can give them a phone and see if there's*
520 *any placements for an animal, and it's just your luck if someone's quite happy to have*
521 *a dog for three months... where they can, they will help.*

522 However, these services were only available for callers in specific areas of the UK and so not
523 every caller would be able to have suitable foster care places arranged for their animals.

524

525

Discussion

526

527 The current study aimed to address gaps in existing reports regarding animals in experiences
528 of DA during the UK COVID-19 lockdown through exploring calls received by UK DAH
529 staff. The interviews uncovered important ongoing issues relating to animals in the context of
530 DA that need attention. Four key and important themes emerged from the interviews that will
531 have significance for those wanting to support victims of DA both during and post-pandemic.

532 First, this study was interested in the potential change in the frequency and nature of animal-
533 related calls during the UK lockdown. Although there was uncertainty surrounding these
534 issues, most (9/11) DAH staff had received animal-related calls during lockdown. Where
535 there was a reported increase, this could have been a by-product of a general increase in DA
536 calls received by helplines over lockdown, which increased the chance of animals being
537 mentioned. Most of the animal-related calls were made to female-focused organisations, and
538 so it seemed rare to have a male caller who mentioned animals. DAH staff felt that the nature
539 of animal-related calls was the same as pre-pandemic, with many callers reporting that their
540 animal had either been directly harmed, or that the abuser had threatened to harm the animal.
541 These findings are in line with pre-pandemic research led by the Dogs Trust Freedom Project
542 (2019) that found 9 in 10 DA professionals had experienced cases where an animal had been

543 abused, and 49% of DA professionals had experienced cases where animals had been killed.
544 It was logical to predict that reported incidents of and severity of AC as a form of DA may
545 have increased during lockdown, similar to human-human violence. However, DAH staff
546 were unsure whether this was the case from their experiences, but nevertheless highlighted
547 that companion animals continue to be a prevalent feature within DA calls.

548 DAH staff reflected upon calls received where animals were frequently being used as tools of
549 abuse or retaliation, a method of exerting control and coercion over the family, through
550 threats to harm, kill, remove, or cease access to the animal, and these concerns were as
551 prevalent pre-pandemic. For example, a previous report found that 75% of victims reported
552 that their abuser had been violent towards their animal or had threatened to harm the animal
553 as a method of control (Endeavour, 2017 as cited by Dogs Trust, 2019). Animals are also
554 often used to intimidate family members, to stop them from disclosing their abuse or seeking
555 support (Ponder & Lockwood, 2000), and DAH staff reported that animals were used to
556 continue abuse or were utilised as ‘post-separation weapons’ to continue contact when a
557 victim had fled.

558 Companion animals are often viewed as family members, and the human-animal bond
559 comprises of a strong sense of love, dependence, care, and affection, that can be reciprocal
560 (Meehan et al., 2017). Those living in adverse home environments often rely on their
561 companion animals for emotional support and comfort and for a sense of protection; a ‘safe-
562 haven’ (Faver & Cavazos, 2008; Flynn, 2000b). In some cases, companion dogs have directly
563 interfered, attempting to protect a victim from the abuser, which placed them at risk of harm
564 (Hardesty et al., 2013). Previous research has found that AC and threats of AC are more
565 common where a strong attachment between a victim and their animal is present, and where
566 the abuser lacks such a bond (Flynn, 2000c; Hardesty et al., 2013). DAH staff in the current
567 study reported that abusers had been manipulating this bond to inflict further emotional harm

568 onto victims, including children. DAH staff had often received calls where animals had been
569 directly harmed during lockdown, and these calls mostly related to dogs and cats. Not all
570 abusers will harm animals, but for those who witness AC, this can cause long-term
571 psychological harm (Faver & Strand, 2007; Flynn, 2000a). One participant in the current
572 study reflected upon a call they had received during lockdown from a female victim who had
573 concerns regarding her child's AC behaviour since she had been exposed to and witnessed
574 AC from her abusive father. Witnessing AC in childhood, is a risk factor for the development
575 of AC behaviour (McDonald et al., 2018; Hawkins et al., 2019) and can increase the risk for
576 long-term emotional and behavioural problems (Ladny & Meyer, 2020). Children's exposure
577 to AC should therefore be an important consideration when evaluating risk when children are
578 living within abusive homes (Hageman et al., 2018).

579 DAH staff reported that animal harm is used by their organisations as an 'indicator of risk'
580 for violence and abuse toward other family members. In the absence of direct animal harm,
581 DAH staff reported that callers were distressed by threats made by their abuser to harm their
582 animal. These threats were a form of emotional blackmail and were enough to prevent
583 victims from seeking refuge due to fears and concerns over their animals' safety and
584 wellbeing. DAH staff reported that victims refused or were reluctant to leave because they
585 believed that their animal would be harmed as a consequence. Animals have therefore been
586 identified as a significant barrier for fleeing (Collins et al., 2017; Volant et al., 2008) with as
587 many as 88% of victims delaying shelter because of their animal (Strand & Faver, 2006).

588 Previous studies have indicated that it is not unanticipated that victims of abuse will consider
589 the safety and wellbeing of their companion animals above their own and will stay with their
590 abuser to protect their animals (Allen et al., 2006; Faver & Strand, 2003; Krienert et al.,
591 2012). Carefully considering animals during safety-planning and providing access to safe
592 housing for multi-species families is therefore important. Alternatively, developing methods

593 of checking on the welfare of companion animals that have remained with an abuser may also
594 be important, especially because victims often continue to worry about animals left behind
595 while they are in shelter (Flynn, 2000 a-c). Leaving an animal behind may not, however,
596 factor into decisions about leaving for those who believe their animals are ‘in safe hands’,
597 either because their abuser has never harmed the animal, or because victims believe that their
598 abuser would never harm the animal in the future (Hardesty et al., 2013).

599

600 **Implications, Limitations, and Conclusions**

601 This is the first UK empirical study that has examined the role of companion animals in
602 experiences of DA during the COVID-19 pandemic, from the perspectives of DAH staff.

603 This study supports and extends upon previous non-UK investigations that have highlighted
604 the complex issues surrounding victims of DA and their companion animals when seeking
605 support from DAHs, that have several implications for practice.

606 When addressing the implications and conclusions of this study, it is first important to
607 consider the limitations of the study design. Although the study was advertised UK-wide, the
608 sample mostly comprised of female-focused organisations based in Scotland, and all but one
609 participant identified as female. The views of the participants in this study can therefore not
610 be generalized to all DAH staffs’ experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and may be
611 limited to a largely Scottish context. The data also largely reflects the experiences of female
612 victims and so further research is needed that focuses on males and other genders for a wider
613 representation. This study also depended on DAH staffs’ reflections on previous experiences
614 and so it may not have been possible for DAH staff to remember more intricate details about
615 the calls received. Accessing and analysing transcripts of these calls in future may therefore
616 be beneficial where possible. Interviewing DAH staff provided a unique perspective about

617 DA experiences during the UK lockdowns, but gaining insights from victims directly is also
618 important, and so is therefore the aim of phase two and three of this larger UK-wide
619 investigation. Finally, companion animals were not the focus of the interviews and so less
620 time was spent discussing these issues. It would be beneficial to carry out future studies that
621 solely focus on animal-related issues to capture a fuller picture of the role of animals within
622 UK DA contexts.

623 Although this study was carried out in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the animal-
624 related issues highlighted were not unique to the UK lockdown and restrictions enforced,
625 these issues were prevalent prior to the pandemic, and will continue to be prevalent post-
626 pandemic. Companion animals continue to be used as tools for emotional abuse and coercive
627 control, through both direct harm and threats to harm, and most often in cases where a victim
628 is highly attached to the animal. This form of abuse and control extends to all family
629 members, including children. Animal harm can be a significant indicator of risk, or a ‘red
630 flag’ for violence, emphasising the need to include questions about animal harm within DA
631 assessments (Krienert et al., 2012). Screening for animal welfare is important, and
632 veterinarians trained to identify cases of intentional abuse, can therefore play an important
633 role in identifying risk for DA (Alleyne et al., 2019).

634 There needs to be animal-related discussions between callers and DAH staff, and plans need
635 to be put in place for victims and their animals prior to seeking shelter (Hardesty et al., 2013),
636 as well as inquiring about companion animals during intake interviews (Krienert et al., 2012).
637 Research has shown that victims want to be asked about their animals and want to know what
638 resources are available for their animals when speaking with DA professionals and have
639 reported that they would have left sooner if they had been aware of animal services earlier
640 (Hardesty et al., 2013). Companion animals should be considered in all aspects of safety-
641 planning, from keeping multi-species families safe whilst still living with an abuser, whilst

642 preparing to leave, and during the post-separation period. The current study offered unique
643 insight into DAH staff experience with animal-related calls as well as insight into their links
644 to and experiences with animal-friendly accommodation and fostering services. Most of the
645 DAH staff had awareness of such organisations where they could signpost their callers to or
646 had direct experience of accommodating victims with animals. This raised awareness that
647 animals are being considered when victims call UK DAH and allowances are being made
648 where possible to allow animals into accommodation to encourage victims to seek refuge.
649 However, allowing animals into refuge was usually an exception. There continues to be a
650 need for safe housing that allows multi-species families in the UK, and DAH staff should be
651 aware of and have links to these services where available, especially because not all victims
652 will have time to plan for their animals before fleeing. Moreover, support for animal-friendly
653 accommodation is provided from studies that demonstrate their effectiveness (Allen et al.,
654 2006; Volant et al., 2008).

655 Although some animal foster care services are available, and continued provision of such
656 services are important, victims who are highly attached to their animals might still refuse
657 refuge because they do not want to be separated from their animal. Victims view animals as
658 important family members, relying on them for protection and emotional comfort, and so
659 keeping multi-species families together is important for psychological wellbeing and
660 recovery following adversity (Applebaum et al., 2021; Hardesty et al., 2013). It is also
661 imperative that the impact of separating children from their animals is considered. Children
662 form strong emotional bonds to their animals and research has found that this bond can buffer
663 against the negative impacts of adversity (Hawkins et al., 2019; Yorke, 2010). Finally, there
664 continues to be a need for evidence-based guidance that addresses the complex needs of
665 victims living within multi-species families (Hageman et al., 2018).

666

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668

669

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Table 1. Information provided about the domestic abuse helpline worker participants.

Participant	Gender	Age	Location	Organisation target	Time at organisation	Calls mentioning pets
1	M	27	Edinburgh	Men and their families	7-months	No
2	F	32	Edinburgh	Anyone in Scotland	Just under 2 years, full-time	Yes
3	F	-	Edinburgh	Men and women in Scotland	1 year and 3 months, full-time	Yes
4	F	29	Renfrewshire	Women, over the age of 16	Since 2015 as a volunteer, full-time paid staff for 2 years	Yes
5	F	46	UK-wide	Men	3 years, full-time	Yes
6	F	38	Glasgow	All victims and witnesses of crime that are residents in Scotland	18 months, part-time	Yes
7	F	55	Inverness	Women, children and young people, all ages	4 and a half years, full-time	Yes
8	F	40	London	Men	2 years, part-time	No (but experienced these in the past)
9	F	49	Glasgow	Women and children	17 months, part-time	Yes
10	F	56	Glasgow	Women, children and young people, same-sex female couples	5 and half years, full-time	Yes
11	F	24	Glasgow	Women	6 months, full-time (working with female victims before this role)	Yes