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‘She couldn’t leave them… the perpetrator had threatened to burn them alive’:

**Domestic abuse helpline calls relating to companion animals during the COVID-19 pandemic**

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Abstract

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

Key words: Animal cruelty; Companion animals; COVID-19; Domestic abuse; Helplines
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
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reported to have had no one to turn to during lockdown. These findings were particularly true for women living with their abuser. The same report found that 53% of female victims reported an increase in children’s exposure to DA, and 38% reported an increase in children being direct recipients of abuse. With this increase, DA helplines (DAH) including audio calls, webchat, and text messaging, became an important support platform in the absence of access to previously available face-to-face or community-based support services. DAH reported increased pressure during lockdown due to an increased level of service provision needed. This was reflected through an increase in telephone calls received and through increased traffic on DA websites, which were reported to increase by as much as 700% (Refuge, 2020). Interviewing DAH staff about the calls they experienced during lockdown therefore offered a novel and insightful window into potential lockdown-related changes in experiences of abuse during lockdown.

It is important to consider that DA often co-occurs with other forms of family abuse and within multi-species households, where companion animals (often referred to as “pets”) are also at-risk of harm. Animal cruelty (AC) is often prevalent in homes where DA and other forms of abuse are also present (Faver & Cavazos, 2007) and research has found that rates of co-occurrence of DA and AC are between 25-86% (Monsalve et al., 2017). Perpetrators of abuse, who have also been cruel to animals, have been found to be more controlling, dangerous, and violent, and utilise a wider range of abusive techniques (Simmons & Lehmann, 2007). AC is now viewed as a ‘red flag’ for abuse and physical violence toward other family members (DeGue & DiLillo, 2009; Faver & Strand, 2003), and in recent years, there have been efforts to train veterinarians to identify and report cases of suspected AC, in effort to safeguard both people and animals at-risk for abuse (Alleyne et al., 2019). Moreover, the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act (2018) recognises AC as a form of abuse and so efforts have been made to offer animal fostering services for women seeking refuge.
The strong emotional bonds that individuals form with their companion animals often comprise of the same attachment features observed in human-human attachment relationships, such as seeing their pet as a safe-haven, deriving support and comfort from them, seeing their pets as a secure base, seeking closeness and proximity to their pet, and feeling distressed when separated (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011). However, these attachments are often used as a platform within DA for furthering abuse and control. Threats to harm companion animals are common to intimidate, induce fear and submission in DA victims, and are used as tools for the exertion of power and control, especially when victims are highly attached to that animal (Allen et al., 2006; Arkow, 2014). Many DA victims (rates vary but are as high as 71%) report that their abuser has hurt or has killed their companion animal (Flynn, 2000a; Riggs et al., 2018). Witnessing AC can cause significant distress for victims, increasing risk for long-term psychological harm, and associations between witnessing AC and future engagement in AC behaviour, i.e., ‘the link’, has also been found (Bright et al., 2018).

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

Although companion animals are often used as tools for abuse, they can also play an important role in one’s experience of abuse, offering victims a sense of emotional support.
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and comfort and a ‘safe-haven’ (Flynn, 2000a, 2000b). Animals can have therapeutic potential, being important coping mechanisms during times of adversity, especially for vulnerable populations, increasing resilience, and buffering against the development of psychopathology (Cameranesi et al., 2021; Hawkins et al., 2019; Taylor & Fraser, 2019). Animals can increase a sense of social connection, preventing feelings of loneliness and social isolation that may have been particularly important when social distancing measures were in place (Oliva & Johnston, 2021). In the general population, companion animals were found to mitigate some of the detrimental psychological effects of the COVID-19 lockdown (Ratschen et al., 2020). Animals can therefore be important for coping and recovery following adversity (Applebaum et al., 2021). It is therefore also important to consider the potential ‘protective’ role of companion animals for victims experiencing DA during lockdown, and so far, this has not been considered in existing empirical studies carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

**Method**

**Research Design, Recruitment, and Participants**

The current study is part of a larger three phase UK-wide investigation into experiences of DA during the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspectives of both DAH staff, and directly from victims, using a mixed-method approach comprised of 1:1 virtual interviews, and an anonymous survey. Ethical approval was granted by the Universities Ethics Committee.
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[2020-13927-12150]. This qualitative study reports the results from the 1:1 virtual interviews with DAH staff (phase one of the study). Participants were 11 DA helpline staff who were recruited through adverts sent to them by their organisation. This number is deemed adequate for achieving theoretical saturation in qualitative designs (Guest et al., 2006). Interested participants could contact the researchers if they were interested in taking part in the interview and so were self-selected. There was no pressure or expectation for staff to take part, and individuals remained anonymous. The DA organisation was not informed if one of their staff members participated. Participants were recruited from a diverse range of DA organisations across the UK, but names of such organisations are omitted for anonymity. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study through an online information sheet before deciding whether to participate. Participants could request the interview schedule in advance. Recruiting through the DA organisations meant that participants had access to a named wellbeing support contact through their organisation if needed. Ten participants identified as female and one participant identified as male, ages ranged between 24 and 56; most were located in Scotland (n=9), one participant was located in London, and one participant worked UK-wide (specific location was not provided). Time spent working within the organisation ranged from six months to six years. Pseudonyms have been used to protect participants’ identities. Full description of the participants can be found in Table 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants were asked to sign an electronic consent form prior to the interview. Interviews were conducted remotely using video software (Microsoft Teams) lasting no more than 60 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Participants were debriefed verbally at the end of the interview. Participants received a £10 Amazon voucher as
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a thank you for taking part. Data was collected between January and May 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic and most interviews were carried out during the second full UK-wide lockdown with stay-at-home restrictions lifting in April 2021. DAH staff reflected upon calls received since the first UK-wide lockdown in March 2020 up until their most recent call. The full interview schedule comprised of 27 questions relating to the nature and frequency of calls received during COVID-19 lockdown, that aimed to identify any potential COVID-19 related changes in these calls. The interview questions were split into four key sections, section one focused on general abuse-related calls, section two related to calls (if any) relating to companion animals within the home, section three related to children (if any) within the home, and section four related to the helpline staff’s own coping and wellbeing, and support received during the pandemic. For the current study, only data relating to companion animals were analyzed and reported. If a participant reported that they had received calls relating to companion animals, they were asked follow-up questions regarding the frequency and nature of these calls, and whether they felt that these types of calls had changed in any way during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008), a widely used inductive and meticulous analytical approach that is data-driven and involves the evaluation of data, interpretation and concluding. This analysis method aims to identify common and recurring themes that are refined through a collaborative and iterative approach. All researchers are involved in the analysis process that is comprised of several stages: 1) familiarization of the data, 2) the production of initial codes, 3) collating codes into potential themes, 4) reviewing and refining themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) selecting quotes that represent each theme and producing the report. Overarching themes represent the central organizing concept (a common, reoccurring pattern in the data), and sub-themes are
organised ‘underneath’ each overarching theme, each focusing on a specific notable element/topic.

Results

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

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

This theme captured helpline staffs’ perceptions about potential lockdown-related changes in the frequency and nature of calls received that mentioned animals, and captured perceptions about any potential changes and/or commonalities in caller characteristics and types of animals mentioned during these calls. First, there were variations in reported frequencies of animal-related calls received during lockdown. Female-focused organisations reported to have received the most animal-related calls and so most, if not all, animal-related calls received by DAH staff were from female callers. However, Kirsten, who worked for an
organisation targeted at both male and female callers, reported to have received more animal-related calls from females, “I think just- definitely every call I'm talking about has been a woman caller”. For Josh and Sigrid, who worked for male-focused organisations, no animal-related calls were received during lockdown. However, Sigrid mentioned that they had experience of such calls in the past when working at a female-focused organisation:

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

The other nine participants all reported that they had received animal-related calls during lockdown, but the frequency of these calls varied between organisations. For example, Kirsten (all genders) reported that animal-related calls were “always outliers those calls... I can almost count them on my two hands, like when someone goes into detail about that”, and Alex (male-focused) and Erica (all genders) reported to have received “a few” calls. Animal-related calls were, however, much more common for the other participants such as for Emma, “that is something that is quite common. Probably on the shifts I do, probably one every couple of days, that pets are used as part of abuse”, and for Rowan, “I’d say that a large majority who we support have pets… a lot of the time there are animals, and they are abused as well”.

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

I hadn’t really discussed pets before the pandemic so to discuss pet during the pandemic is definitely different. Yeah, there was an increase… and there have been a few more animal related cases come through. It’s assault to the person, threatening abuse to the person and then also there is an animal charge in there. So there have been a few more come through the past year (Erica).

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

Across participants it seemed that the animal-related issues and concerns raised by callers had not changed compared to pre-pandemic, Emma reported that they had received more animal-related calls during lockdown, but this may have been due to receiving more DA calls in general, and the nature of these calls had not changed, “I don’t think in terms of actual content, it’s just we’ve had more calls, so it has come up more often”, and Alex could not recall if the nature of these calls had changed, “… it’s very difficult to know if there were any changes, I think from the few cases that I can recall, there were no changes”. Across participants there was a general view that the nature of the animal-related calls was similar to those received pre-pandemic and that these mostly related to concerns about access to animal-friendly accommodation (covered in more depth within Theme 4) as described by Alex:

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

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

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

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

Theme 2: Animals as Tools for Abuse During Lockdown

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

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

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

286 Calls received by DAH staff during lockdown often mentioned direct harm toward the
287 animal. Kirsten for example, mentioned that they had callers who “are absolutely clear from
288 what the perpetrator has said that he will hurt the animals” and that these calls were quite
289 frequent, “someone speaking about a dog and the perpetrator being violent towards the
290 animal... if I think about it, that's quite common”. Brianna mentioned that direct harm could
291 be a form of retaliation, “similar to children, they will kick the dog just to get back at the
292 women”. Even in the absence of previous direct animal harm, the threat alone was a form of
293 abuse, and was enough to cause distress to the victim, as described by Simone, “…even the
294 threat – we hear that a lot, you know; ‘he threatened to harm the animal’”, “…If he can be
295 cruel to a pet, or even the threat of being cruel to a pet, is a way of having power over
296 somebody”. This was further described Brianna and Rowan:

297 They may not even hit the dog but threaten to. So again, they are controlling the
298 situation by threatening to hit the dog. Or even the women may think it could happen.
299 The perpetrator may not have said they will, but the women knows that it could
300 happen (Brianna).

301 There are other times where women may say that the perpetrator hasn’t harmed the
302 dog but the women knows that they could and so they get quite upset about that, you
303 know. So, even though a perpetrator may not have harmed the dog, the threat of that
304 is there and it is on a woman’s mind (Rowan).

305 Therefore, animals were viewed by DAH staff as ‘indicators of risk’ for violence, “animals
306 are definitely an indicator of the level of risk probably more than anything else” (Simone),
307 and a ‘warning sign’ as described by Brianna:
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We do a test, the police do it as well, and it’s just safe-guarding questions. There are twenty-four questions, and one of them is ‘has he ever harmed an animal or pet?’. That is one of the red flags that we see. If they say yes then that is really quite high risk... animals are kind of one of the warning signs, if they have been harming animals (Brianna).

Animals were also, in some cases, reported to have been used as a ‘post-separation weapon’, a tool of abuse even when the victim had already fled, as described by Kirsten and Olivia:

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

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

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

Theme 2 Subtheme A: Manipulating the Family-Animal Bond
This theme encompassed reports about animals being used as a manipulation tool, not just for female victims, but for the whole family. Animals were used as a method of exerting control and power over all family members by using their emotional bond with the animal as a springboard for abuse, as described by Olivia:

"... and that's actually one of the biggest signs of domestic abuse and one of the biggest issues in terms of domestic abuse is when there's an animal in the house, and the animals are used to control the whole family because the whole family is in love with a dog and it's a member of the family, and it will be used to continue the abuse, either being hit and threatened or just the threat of the animal being put down or taken away or been hurt" (Olivia).

Often this form of abuse was directed at the children within the home, as described by Brianna, "a lot of kids may say 'dad hit the dog'. So they are controlling the whole situation. So yeah pets are a big part of their life", and Emma reflected upon animals being used as emotional blackmail:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This theme largely encapsulated callers fears over the safety of their animal, and how this
was a significant barrier to leaving, “I can't leave because I can't leave this animal’ either
because it means so much to them or because they are genuinely worried about what would
happen to the animal” (Emma). This was exacerbated in cases where the abuser had inflicted
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direct harm onto the animal in the past, “so there’s the sense that ‘I can’t leave because the perpetrator is going to hurt’” (Kirsten). These fears left victims feeling trapped with their abuser, as described by Kirsten and Olivia, “those callers will generally feel completely trapped like they can’t go anywhere” (Kirsten), “they feel as though they’re not going to be able to remove themselves from the situation” (Olivia). Kirsten further reflected upon how even when the situation had escalated and became more dangerous, callers still refused to ‘leave their animal behind’ because of the threats from the abuser:

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

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

Theme 3: Animals as Barriers to Refuge During Lockdown

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

Victims were reluctant to leave if they were unable to take their animal with them, both due to their bond and their reliance on the animal emotionally, and due to their concerns over the safety and welfare of their animal, as described by Kirsten and Rowan:

If the person has mentioned pets, that will be the reason that they aren’t leaving. Like they do want to leave. They do feel that the situation is dangerous, and they want to get out... and it’s sort of that sense of like I cannot leave without it like that's not an option (Kirsten).
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For a lot of women, they say that they would rather stay in their situation and know that their dog or cat is safe, than go into a refuge and not have their dog or cat with them... because for a lot of women that's their only consistent thing in their life, and it's what they know, and they have had these animals for a long time. They also don't want further abuse to be put onto the animal when they leave. So, I'd say it's a huge barrier for women (Rowan).

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

Theme 3 Subtheme A: Lack of Animal-Friendly Accommodation

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

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

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

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

People have totally turned down refuge or support. One woman had three dogs and we were going to give them to foster care but they hadn’t had all their injections so we can’t always give them or take them in for that reason. So, no matter what we did we couldn’t get this lady to come into refuge (Brianna).

DAH staff reported that not all callers were aware of what support was available in terms of fostering services and animal-friendly accommodation, which acted as a barrier to seeking support, as described by Kirsten, “in their mind they’re already sort of feeling like they can’t get help, like they’re not going to find help that’s suitable for them because of their animals”, and by Simone:

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

Some of the animal-related calls received by DAH staff during lockdown related to service animals, and callers feeling unable to leave because of their reliance on, and bond with their service animal, or being unsure whether there was accommodation available that would allow them to stay together, as described by Emma, “that has come up on a couple of calls as well where women aren’t sure where they would go because they need their service dog”, and by Simone:
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I have had a couple of calls where it has been service dogs as well, where they are like it’s not just that you have an emotional bond that this is my pet, but this is an animal that you need to function (Simone).

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

Theme 3 Subtheme B: Lack of Social Support Systems

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

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

Even when callers did have social support systems in place, these contacts may not have been able to take care of the animal, “and other family members can’t always take the animal. I know one person whose dad has COPD so he couldn’t take the pets” (Brianna). Even when social support was available, victims wanted to remain with their animals due to their reliance on them for comfort and coping, as described in more detail within the next sub-theme.
Theme 3 Subtheme C: Animals as Coping Mechanisms

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

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

This bond meant that victims would stay with their abuser so they could care for their animal, “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 sure it is okay’” (Kirsten). DAH staff reported that even in cases where foster care was available, victims still refused to leave because they did not want to be separated from their pet, as described by Brianna:

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

It therefore seems important that DAH have awareness of, and links to animal friendly accommodation where victims and their animals can stay together; this is described in more detail within the next theme.
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Theme 4: Helpline Staffs’ Awareness of and Links to Animal Friendly Accommodation and Fostering Services

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

We can’t force people into refuge, we can only do as much. I mean we have a really good connection with our foster carers for pets. They really do look after the pets so well. I mean I don’t really know what we would do without them. Because, you know, some people do give their pets up and come into refuge and are then able to get them back once they have started their new life or something, you know (Brianna).

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

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

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

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

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

Discussion

The current study aimed to address gaps in existing reports regarding animals in experiences of DA during the UK COVID-19 lockdown through exploring calls received by UK DAH staff. The interviews uncovered important ongoing issues relating to animals in the context of DA that need attention. Four key and important themes emerged from the interviews that will have significance for those wanting to support victims of DA both during and post-pandemic.
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First, this study was interested in the potential change in the frequency and nature of animal-related calls during the UK lockdown. Although there was uncertainty surrounding these issues, most (9/11) DAH staff had received animal-related calls during lockdown. Where there was a reported increase, this could have been a by-product of a general increase in DA calls received by helplines over lockdown, which increased the chance of animals being mentioned. Most of the animal-related calls were made to female-focused organisations, and so it seemed rare to have a male caller who mentioned animals. DAH staff felt that the nature of animal-related calls was the same as pre-pandemic, with many callers reporting that their animal had either been directly harmed, or that the abuser had threatened to harm the animal. These findings are in line with pre-pandemic research led by the Dogs Trust Freedom Project (2019) that found 9 in 10 DA professionals had experienced cases where an animal had been abused, and 49% of DA professionals had experienced cases where animals had been killed.

It was logical to predict that reported incidents of and severity of AC as a form of DA may have increased during lockdown, similar to human-human violence. However, DAH staff were unsure whether this was the case from their experiences, but nevertheless highlighted that companion animals continue to be a prevalent feature within DA calls.

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

Companion animals are often viewed as family members, and the human-animal bond comprises of a strong sense of love, dependence, care, and affection, that can be reciprocal (Meehan et al., 2017). Those living in adverse home environments often rely on their companion animals for emotional support and comfort and for a sense of protection; a ‘safe-haven’ (Faver & Cavazos, 2008; Flynn, 2000b). In some cases, companion dogs have directly interfered, attempting to protect a victim from the abuser, which placed them at risk of harm (Hardesty et al., 2013). Previous research has found that AC and threats of AC are more common where a strong attachment between a victim and their animal is present, and where the abuser lacks such a bond (Flynn, 2000c; Hardesty et al., 2013). DAH staff in the current study reported that abusers had been manipulating this bond to inflict further emotional harm onto victims, including children. DAH staff had often received calls where animals had been directly harmed during lockdown, and these calls mostly related to dogs and cats. Not all abusers will harm animals, but for those who witness AC, this can cause long-term psychological harm (Faver & Strand, 2007; Flynn, 2000a). One participant in the current study reflected upon a call they had received during lockdown from a female victim who had concerns regarding her child’s AC behaviour since she had been exposed to and witnessed AC from her abusive father. Animals are often mentioned in psychosocial reports arising from child protection referrals with AC being a significant concern (Riggs et al., 2022). Witnessing AC in childhood, is a risk factor for the development of AC behaviour (McDonald et al., 2018; Hawkins et al., 2019) and can increase the risk for long-term emotional and behavioural problems (Ladny & Meyer, 2020). AC should therefore be an important consideration when evaluating risk when children are living within abusive homes.
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(Hageman et al., 2018), especially because AC can also indicate more severe cases of child abuse (Riggs et al., 2022).

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

Previous studies have indicated that it is not unanticipated that victims of abuse will consider the safety and wellbeing of their companion animals above their own and will stay with their abuser to protect their animals (Allen et al., 2006; Faver & Strand, 2003; Krienert et al., 2012). Carefully considering animals during safety-planning and providing access to safe housing for multi-species families is therefore important. Alternatively, developing methods of checking on the welfare of companion animals that have remained with an abuser may also be important, especially because victims often continue to worry about animals left behind while they are in shelter (Flynn, 2000 a-c). Leaving an animal behind may not, however, factor into decisions about leaving for those who believe their animals are ‘in safe hands’, either because their abuser has never harmed the animal, or because victims believe that their abuser would never harm the animal in the future (Hardesty et al., 2013).

Implications, Limitations, and Conclusions
This is the first UK empirical study that has examined the role of companion animals in experiences of DA during the COVID-19 pandemic, from the perspectives of DAH staff. This study supports and extends upon previous non-UK investigations that have highlighted the complex issues surrounding victims of DA and their companion animals when seeking support from DAHs, that have several implications for practice.

When addressing the implications and conclusions of this study, it is first important to consider the limitations of the study design. Although the study was advertised UK-wide, the sample mostly comprised of female-focused organisations based in Scotland, and all but one participant identified as female. The views of the participants in this study can therefore not be generalized to all DAH staffs’ experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and may be limited to a largely Scottish context. The data also largely reflects the experiences of female victims and so further research is needed that focuses on males and other genders for a wider representation. This study also depended on DAH staffs’ reflections on previous experiences and so it may not have been possible for DAH staff to remember more intricate details about the calls received. Accessing and analysing transcripts of these calls in future may therefore be beneficial where possible. Interviewing DAH staff provided a unique perspective about DA experiences during the UK lockdowns, but gaining insights from victims directly is also important, and so is therefore the aim of phase two and three of this larger UK-wide investigation. Finally, companion animals were not the focus of the interviews and so less time was spent discussing these issues. It would be beneficial to carry out future studies that solely focus on animal-related issues to capture a fuller picture of the role of animals within UK DA contexts.

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

There needs to be animal-related discussions between callers and DAH staff, and plans need to be put in place for victims and their animals prior to seeking shelter (Hardesty et al., 2013), as well as inquiring about companion animals during intake interviews (Krienert at al., 2012). Research has shown that victims want to be asked about their animals and want to know what resources are available for their animals when speaking with DA professionals and have reported that they would have left sooner if they had been aware of animal services earlier (Hardesty et al., 2013). Companion animals should be considered in all aspects of safety-planning, from keeping multi-species families safe whilst still living with an abuser, whilst preparing to leave, and during the post-separation period. The current study offered unique insight into DAH staff experience with animal-related calls as well as insight into their links to and experiences with animal-friendly accommodation and fostering services. Most of the DAH staff had awareness of such organisations where they could signpost their callers to or had direct experience of accommodating victims with animals. This raised awareness that animals are being considered when victims call UK DAH and allowances are being made where possible to allow animals into accommodation to encourage victims to seek refuge. However, allowing animals into refuge was usually an exception. There continues to be a need for safe housing that allows multi-species families in the UK, and DAH staff should be
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Aware of and have links to these services where available, especially because not all victims will have time to plan for their animals before fleeing. Moreover, support for animal-friendly accommodation is provided from studies that demonstrate their effectiveness (Allen et al., 2006; Volant et al., 2008).

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

Conflict of interest: None to disclose.

References

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

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