

As readers will know I regularly speak on issues relating to older people, whether it is to do with dementia, care funding or social isolation and loneliness. What readers might not know is that I am also Chairman of the Pet Advisory Committee, a group made up of companion animal and welfare charities. On one particular matter the two overlap – the psychological and health benefit of pet ownership for all, but particularly the elderly.

There has been much research which shows that having pets as one of the important factors for promoting well-being in older people. While overall pet ownership is estimated to be around 50%, this diminishes with age. Nevertheless, approximately one quarter of all people over retirement age own pets. It is therefore surprising that the importance of pet ownership has been largely ignored when catering for the needs of older people requiring residential care or sheltered housing. However this is not universal and locally I have witnessed the value of schemes like special dogs visiting for patting by residents, particularly for those with dementia.

The love and companionship offered by a pet is endless and unchangeable and can give carers a break from the stress of constant care. Pets don't suffer from compassion fatigue or suffer from the stress that human carers feel. As well as providing comfort, love and protection for older people they can often provide much needed therapeutic aid for children, and this paper has in the past published heart warming stories of companion animals bringing stability in the lives of others.

Psychological and physical health in later life depends on maintaining and supporting activities and lifestyles that are important to older people. Pet ownership is one such important element in a lifestyle that can promote health, happiness and general well-being.