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# *'We're not professionals when it comes to dogs:'* Social work encounters with dogs and their implications for education and practice

Denise Turner *

Department of Social Work, University of Hertfordshire, College Lane, Hatfield, AL10 9AB, UK

*Corresponding author. Department of Social Work, University of Hertfordshire, College Lane, Hatfield, AL10 9AB, UK. E-mail: d.turner4@herts.ac.uk

## Abstract

In the past few years, there has been a rise in UK dog attacks, including fatal harm to children and detriment to social workers who were not able to adequately assess risks or were the subjects of direct dog attacks. This rise in attacks is accompanied by a growth in UK dog ownership, partly as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, making it increasingly likely that social workers will encounter dogs through their routine work. However, despite this, a literature search returned no results for specific social work research in this area, which appears to be neglected as a topic, within both academic study and social work education. This article addresses the gap by reporting the findings of a mixed-methods research study involving forty-three social workers. Five themes, drawn from the data, highlight concerns around direct dog aggression, but also around religious and health considerations, together with a lack of education and training in this area. Respondents agreed that further support and training were vital to support encounters with dogs, alongside opportunities to share narratives in this previously under researched area.



BASW
The professional association for social work and social workers
www.basw.co.uk

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## Introduction

Social work is a 'practice-based discipline' (IFSW 2014) with practitioners therefore commonly engaged in routine home visits. Whilst the main focus of these will be on the people, social workers frequently encounter dogs in the home, thereby adding potential layers of complexity and risk to their visits. This is particularly significant, since there has been a rise in dog attacks and associated fatalities across England and Wales (Fagg, Unia, and Hattenstone 2024), for example, the case of baby, Elle Doherty, who was mauled to death by the family dog (Robinson 2024). In social work specifically, social worker Charlotte Orr was permanently disfigured after a dog attack on a home visit (Atik 2021), whilst Leila Annikici Karhu's name was removed from the Social Work England register after a child in her care suffered a near fatal dog attack (Bagdi 2022). The register is a statutory list of social workers in England, held by the professional regulator, which is available for the public to search online. The register ensures that anyone practising as a social worker has appropriate training, qualifications, and experience (Social Work England 2024) and removal therefore renders an individual unable to practice as a social worker.

There has been recent interest in England around 'bringing animals into Social Workspaces' (Stephens 2024), and 'species-spanning relationships' (Stephens 2023), as well as some accounts of cats in social work practice (James, Mitchell, and Morgan 2019).

However, a literature review conducted for this study shows an absence of research specifically focussing on the risks and complexities that social workers may confront when encountering dogs on visits, as well as the potential religious and cultural implications of these encounters.

This article makes a start at addressing the gap in the literature by reporting the results of an exploratory mixed-methods study, focussing on social worker's encounters with dogs in social work practice. There were forty-three responses to the survey, and thirteen subsequent interviews were conducted. The study was carried out in accordance with ethical consent, so the participants were anonymized and therefore the exact nature of their specialisms is unknown, but all were qualified social workers, in Adults and Children's services with one currently undertaking a Degree Apprenticeship and another having left practice for Higher Education.

The research findings show that social work encounters with dogs involve risk and other cultural, religious, and relational factors. Social

workers also occasionally took dogs home, thereby creating legal and other risks. Research participants were clear that the issue of dogs is a significant one but differed on whether further support should be derived from training. There was a distinct drive to share narratives of dogs within social work practice, together with consensus on the need for further assistance, education, and research in this area.

## Dogs and social work

In the UK, there has been a recent rise in dog ownership partly as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, (Lilico 2023) with more people keeping dogs as companions, now that working from home is more common. Although statistics vary between 13.5 million pet dogs (UK Pet Food 2024) and 10.6 million pet dogs (PDSA Paw Report 2024), it is estimated that between 28 percent and 36 percent of homes own a dog (PDSA Paw Report 2024; UK Pet Food 2024).

Fox and Gee (2019) discuss how domestic animals, predominantly dogs and cats, have become increasingly incorporated into family homes, whilst McConnell, Paige Lloyd, and Humphrey (2019) highlight the role that pets can play in improving the wellbeing of people using social work services. However, Keens (2024) discusses some of the potential problems with this, arguing that English society cannot talk critically about pets, thereby posing potential risks to both children and adults.

These considerations are highly relevant for social workers in navigating home environments, for, as Ferguson (2017) discusses, these are the most common sites of social work practice, involving both family members and the relationships that they share, including dogs and other domestic pets.

Dogs are therefore a common component of social work practice, and yet they remain largely absent from the literature. Recent work by Stephens (2024) encourages those involved in social work to 'consider the human-animal bond', but, whilst a welcome addition to a limited field, the work is not empirical research with social workers, or those who use services. Additionally, whilst 'bringing animals into Social Workspaces' (Stephens 2024) may be helpful, it is important to consider the existing lack of policy, education, and other guidance, which this study aims at starting to address. 'Bringing dogs into social workspaces' is also impacted by austerity in the UK, which has led to an increase in re-homing, whilst many animal charities are creating food banks to assist struggling owners with feeding their pets (Murray 2022). Where dogs are hungry, or owners cannot afford to take unwell animals to the vet, there is also a higher chance of resulting dog aggression through 'trigger stacking,' which manifests as an intense and often aggressive reaction to multiple stressors, for example, pain, neglect, or hunger (Gillies 2024).

In social work, aggressive dog behaviour has had significant repercussions for practitioners (Atik 2021; Bagdi 2022) and additionally, under the amendment to section 3 of the Dangerous Dogs Act [Gov.UK (2014)], it is an offence to own or be in charge of a dog that is dangerously out of control in any place, including all private property. The Act gives protection to professions such as social work, who may have a duty to make home visits. Therefore, in addition to injury, social workers face the potential of people they work with receiving a large fine, or even a prison sentence, with the concomitant risk of the dog being euthanized or removed. This is particularly significant when considering McConnell, Paige Lloyd, and Humphrey's (2019) work on the benefits of pet ownership for those who use social work services and with whom social workers may have formed positive relationships. Additionally, there may be other implications for social workers who have specific cultural or religious beliefs, or allergies. Berglund (2014) discusses the issues for practicing Muslims who consider dogs to be unclean, thereby invalidating their worship. Within England, the profession's commitment to anti-oppressive practice is evidenced within the code of ethics (BASW 2021), the Professional Standards (Social Work England 2019), and the Professional Capabilities Framework, which underpins social work practice and learning, through nine domains which connect specialisms and roles. These frameworks all focus on the importance of inclusion, and therefore the religious and other factors posed by contact with dogs necessitate serious attention.

## The research design

A literature review prior to the study highlighted a lack of research specifically focussed on social worker's experiences of encountering dogs. In response, this article aims at beginning to fill this gap in the literature by presenting findings from a mixed-methods study focussed on social workers experiences of encountering dogs. The research questions underpinning the study were as follows:

- What provision (if any) educates social work students and practitioners on how to assess dog behaviour and minimize risk?
- What narratives are told by practising social workers and students regarding encounters with dogs?
- What are the main challenges (if any) faced by social work practitioners and students when encountering dogs in practice?
- What training (if any) would social workers and students find useful in encountering dogs in their practice?

The study was granted ethical consent by the host University, and an initial survey, consisting of eight questions, was developed using

Microsoft Forms. Each of the questions allowed participants to add comments.

The survey was initially distributed to practitioners via the Principal Social Worker network, who, in England, have a national role in quality assuring social work practice within local authorities. The network links regional Principal Social Workers, thereby helping them to support social workers and those in receipt of services (Research in Practice 2024).

The initial survey elicited twenty responses, all from within England, with ten responses from the same local authority. The remaining ten responses were largely from the south of England but extending to the West and the East. These initial responses then formed the content for two published pieces in non-peer reviewed trade magazines (Turner 2024a; Turner 2024b). The link for the survey was included in both pieces, resulting in a further twenty-three responses, making a total of forty-three survey respondents. The survey was conducted anonymously, but with an option to participate in a follow-up interview, necessitating contact via email. Thirteen of the original respondents were later interviewed over MS Teams, having received both the ethical consent and Information for Participants, which form part of the study's ethical approval.

Twelve of the thirteen interviewees were experienced social workers, with the remaining one currently undertaking a Degree Apprenticeship. Interviewees included a manager in Children's services and a Social Work Lecturer, who had previously worked as a Social worker, with six participants working in Fostering and four in Adult services.

Two of the interviewees were male, with the other eleven female, and three of the interview participants identified as having a disability under the Equality Act. Three of the interview participants were from non-white backgrounds, with two who were Muslim. The interviewees were all from England, with a geographical spread from the north to the south coast and the west country.

Interviews were conducted using an open-ended narrative approach (Riessman 1993) in order that participant voices could be captured, without the use of formulaic questions. Participants were asked at the beginning of the interview to say why they had taken the time to participate in the research. Interviews lasted between twenty-five minutes and an hour and were audio-recorded and then transcribed, after which they were sent to the respondent for approval, when the recording was subsequently deleted. All identifying details discussed in this article have been altered to protect the confidentiality of the participants in accordance with ethical approval.

Data from the survey were converted into Microsoft Excel and grouped into themes according to their relevance in answering the research questions. Survey data were cross-referenced with the interviews, and both were initially coded and analysed using an 'artfully

interpretative approach' which Braun and Clarke describe as embracing 'the inherent subjectivity of coding' (2024). Data were first coded for similarity and then for the ways it links with the research questions. Finally, data were coded again for researcher bias, in order that deep engagement with the data could be achieved (Braun and Clarke 2024). Five main themes were identified, which all corresponded to the research questions.

## Themes

### Theme 1. Social work training and support needs

In the survey, participants were asked two questions relating to education and training. First, 'have you received any training either in your initial prequalifying education or as CPD on how to assess dog behaviour and minimize risk?' All forty-three respondents answered 'no' to this question. This was followed by 'What (if any) training, advice or information do you think social workers would benefit from in respect of encountering dogs in practice?' In response to this question, eleven survey participants suggested that training in what constitutes 'normal' dog behaviour would be helpful, whilst another six requested training in managing aggressive dogs, and a further two participants stated that any training would be helpful. A further four participants wanted to see training that was specifically linked with lone working, with three others suggested training in managing dog owners. Respondents also requested training that was linked to legislation and to the specific needs of fostering. This was perhaps not a surprising finding, as although the exact specialisms of many of the research participants were unknown, a quarter of those who agreed to be interviewed were social workers from fostering.

Contrary to the majority of respondents, one participant was doubtful of the value of training:

> *I am not sure training would help as I imagine each dog is different in respect of their presentation and aggression—I would worry that a short training course would mean some social workers may then think they are experts in dog behaviour which would put them at more risk.*

However, the majority of respondents expressed an urgent need for some form of training:

> *Social workers are not dog handlers … much more training is required!*

In the interviews, social workers from fostering were a majority and described having to complete dog risk assessments, but commonly without any specialist support. This was a theme in the survey and heavily emphasized in the qualitative interviews:

> *Yeah, I've had to do [dog risk assessments] twice and I said to my manager I'm not really sure what to do, I'm not exactly a dog therapist or a dog behaviourist, what do I know? And also, just because you assess a dog at that point you don't know what's going to happen…*
>
> *We use the Coram BAAF Dangerous Dog Assessment, but its very basic and none of us know how to risk assess a dog.*

Despite valuing their professional autonomy, social workers in both the survey and the interviews articulated a need for further support in this area, which was linked to further education at both pre- and post-qualifying levels, as well as to legislation around dogs:

> *And there is a Dangerous Dogs Act… there are also lists especially online of dogs that are not suitable around babies and young children. And that is often overlooked. And that needs a bit more clarification.*

One respondent discussed resorting to the internet to increase her knowledge, suggesting that a specialist role could be shared across local authorities:

> *We have no one that we can go to and get advice… there have been times I have googled who can I contact … it would be really helpful if we had someone who's a kind of lead on dogs…*

In many local authorities represented within the research, risk from dogs was recorded on a 'Hazard Warning Database', although this was not routinely used, suggesting a potential need for further training. As one participant explained it:

> *Basically if we become aware of an individual or a property where there is a significant risk we are supposed to fill in a form, we are supposed to discuss it with the individual … and then discuss it with our managers and fill it in on the system … and it alerts other council workers whether there are risks… for instance if there is an individual in the house with threatening behaviour it does actually identify also dangerous animals… it is up to us to check it. I can tell you that not everyone does check it.*

This was reinforced by other participants in different authorities, who highlighted both individual and organizational issues with using Hazard Warning Databases:

> *I don't look for hazards before I go out. It just didn't really occur to me it's not part of standard practice. It probably should be but it's not something that has been drilled into me.*

## Theme 2. Social workers' narratives of encounters with dogs

Social workers' narratives of their encounters with dogs, emerging during the research described quite unexpected incidents, which illustrate the

complexity of this issue, particularly set against a rise in fatal dog attacks (Keens 2024). One social worker described visiting a house where the owner had removed all the internal doors and replaced them with wrought iron gates, behind which were several angry dogs.

There were also examples of the ways in which the living conditions of the dogs were both indicative of and contributed to safeguarding concerns. For example, one interviewee described a mother she had been working with for over a year asking for help with a broken toilet:

> *And she showed me into the bathroom and there was a German shepherd perched on the end of the bath pooing into a bath that was full of faeces.*

This account resonates with both Pink's (2009) work on sensory ethnography and Ferguson's (2018) discussion of the embodied aspects of visiting domestic spaces, where powerful emotions such as disgust may cause social workers to miss important details. In this instance, the worker was confronted, not only with unsanitary conditions, which pointed to safeguarding conditions within the home, but was also at risk of infection herself (Mayon-White 2005), another aspect of social work practice which is seldom discussed. There are also established links between the living conditions and abuse of pets, and domestic and other violence towards people (Links group 2024).

However, a different factor emerging from the research was the capacity for dogs to help build relationships, as this social worker describes:

> *I think clients can feel more at ease knowing and seeing that you share their interest in dogs, as it can make you appear "more human," even during difficult conversations or situations.*

This relational connection evokes Ferguson et al.'s (2022) concept of the 'holding relationship' where social workers immersed themselves in the details of service user lives, thereby building trust and containment. As dogs can be a vital part of the family, the social workers who showed interest in the family dog were demonstrating this 'holding relationship' in practice.

Another respondent's narrative of a woman she had worked with, supports this from the perspective of the wellbeing impacts that dogs may bring users of services (McConnell, Paige Lloyd, and Humphrey 2019)

> *She had four dogs and they ended up all being rehomed and then despite the fact she was bedbound, she decided to haul herself into a wheelchair, … after going to the cash machine to buy a dog off a random stranger—the motivation of people and the determination for that companionship.*

However, another social worker, who transgressed the largely unspoken bond between dog owners and their pets, was subject to a formal complaint, illustrating further the importance of dogs in the 'holding relationship' (Ferguson et al. 2022):

> *So she made a comment about the dog and we ended up with a formal complaint … She basically said 'your dog is very noisy instead of actually openly saying 'actually I don't particularly like dogs, would you mind just putting the dog away because the dog is being stressed and I'm getting stressed … but I think because she didn't have that kind of openness or she didn't feel that she could, so obviously they make a big song of it saying that she was rude to them and to the dog.*

Another aspect of social work practice, mentioned by two of the interview participants, was social worker's looking after dogs when service users were incapacitated:

> *We have a lot of staff that have taken clients dogs home free of charge… people are making it up as they go along… if he needed an urgent vet appointment or something—is the practitioner going to pay for this?*

This practice links to other findings within this study, and indeed to the lack of research and consistent process around dogs in social work practice, leaving workers feeling that they were 'making it up as they go along.' Taking dogs home can be seen as another attempt to provide a 'holding relationship' (Ferguson et al. 2022). However, the practice is fraught with risks, not least of something happening to the dog whilst in the social workers care.

## Theme 3. Risk and safeguarding in social work encounters with dogs

In the survey, participants were asked whether they had encountered aggressive dog behaviour and how they had dealt with this. Twenty-seven respondents had directly experienced aggressive behaviour, and the remaining sixteen said they had not experienced direct aggression but had heard anecdotes from colleagues. Additionally, participants were asked whether they were 'dog lovers' and how they felt this may impact on practice. In the survey, twenty-nine respondents identified themselves as 'dog lovers' with twelve saying they actively did not like dogs, and a further two saying they were 'neutral.' Intriguingly, many of those who dubbed themselves 'dog lovers' felt that this could be a risk in practice:

> *I am probably more relaxed due to being a dog lover, but maybe too relaxed.*

> *Could be less concerned or aware of concerning behaviours.*

Those who did not like dogs also felt that the dog may present a potential risk to their practice:

> *It makes me apprehensive every time I have to visit a home with dogs. This impacts my ability to pay full attention to the purpose of the visit.*

In his discussion of how children become invisible in child protection work, Ferguson (2017) discusses practice encounters where social workers become overwhelmed by emotions or events and there are parallels here in those social workers who were scared of dogs and could not focus on the purpose of the visit, thereby potentially missing important information and increasing risk.

Four survey respondents had also been bitten by dogs, one on more than one occasion. Three of these participants were bitten by dogs they knew well and had previously petted. The respondent who experienced the worst dog attack was very familiar with the dog and had visited the family 'at least twenty times'. She suffered what she described as a 'very significant dog bite' when on a final home visit and had to spend several days in hospital:

> *Literally out of nowhere this dog just attached itself to my leg just from nothing… I said I'm really sorry, I said I need to go … and then the dog's still trying to bite me and trying to get at my trousers, so I think that's when the owner of the dog sort of panicked…*
>
> *I just left and … walked back to my car … I'm not very good with wounds and blood, I can't look at it, so I called my husband and said 'I've just been bitten by a dog, so I don't want to drive… but in this time obviously you're going into shock, and I started to feel really sick. .I managed to get myself out of the car…, and I went into a post office and then I said to the man … I've just been bitten by a dog … can I wait in here until my husband comes and then the man comes around from the counter and he said 'Oh my God we need to call an ambulance' and obviously unbeknown to me there's like blood everywhere and all over his floor…; the man had called an ambulance and then, I ended up in hospital for five days.*

Many participants stated that these dog risks were evidence that social workers are expendable, particularly when compared to other professionals:

> *It's the same old thing with social work and we get sent to things other people don't and you know there's all that stuff in the news not that long ago … about the post office workers and dogs, and they didn't even go into someone's house. Whereas we go into people's homes with unknown dogs, unknown people, unknown dogs by ourselves.*

This feeling of being expendable is supported by a recent study of 7,000 social workers (Samuel 2024) which showed that staff feel less valued than in previous years, with a greater likelihood of resignation.

Aside from feeling of limited value, the risks of being bitten and the challenges to practice, respondents in this research identified safeguarding threats to children, created directly or indirectly by dogs in the home:

> *So, the children are actually being neglected and all the money is going into dog outfits and raw food, which is quite expensive, always at the vets but won't take kids to the dentist …*

Other participants cited risks to children from dog aggression, with some relaying incidents that had happened to colleagues or users of services, reminiscent of the fatal attack on Elle Doherty (Robinson 2024):

> *I know looked after children who have been bitten by dogs as well … the child got bitten on the nose very near their eye. It was a horrendous situation.*

The potential risks to children highlighted here are supported by data from NHS Digital (2023) which shows that children under four are most likely to present in hospital with dog related injuries.

## Theme 4. Religious, health, and cultural considerations

Aside from the risks of dog aggression, social workers raised significant cultural and health considerations which create potential issues for the profession's anti-oppressive base. One male, practising Muslim social worker described:

> *When I was more frontline on visits I'd wear different clothes on the days I knew I'd have to go out because I couldn't pray in those clothes because I knew a dog would come up to me and sometimes I'd have two pairs of trousers just so that when I had to pray I'd change because I knew that a dog would come and those trousers would have saliva on them and the dog would sniff and touch them and they would be impure so I can't pray in those clothes so it's an extra hassle but again you are just expected to do it, there's no discussion there, no empathy in that regard.*

This links to data from the latest Local Government Association survey which showed a significant increase in reports of racism amongst social workers (Samuel 2024).

Issues of culture also arose in this research study as a potential conflict between the pet-loving English and those who did not share this value (Keens 2024). The male Muslim interviewee described earlier summarized this as:

> *You'll get off social workers from the BAME, global majority background who feel marginalised and not considered because … the in home/family/kissing dogs and having them on your sofa or in your bed. That's really an alien concept. Likewise, the concept that dog is a man's best friend.*

Conversely, a service manager interviewed for the study suggested that social workers needed to accept prevailing culture, regardless of their

beliefs, again potentially echoing the feelings of workers reported in the Local Government Association survey (Samuel 2024):

> *You know this is the English culture and you have a job to do, and I need to be putting my beliefs potentially behind me and I will still need to have that case that is allocated.*

Social workers who were not religious, but had mental and physical health issues around dogs, were also expected to attend homes without any reasonable adjustments, which again is problematic when viewed through the lens of social work values and ethics. Six of the respondents to the survey described themselves as 'phobic of dogs', two after experiences of being bitten as children, whilst another respondent described self-managing her dog- allergy:

> *I've never kind of mentioned it to my workplace. I guess because I'm able to manage it by asking people and taking anti histamines… I do have to plan for example to go home and get changed right away and have a wash, or at least make sure I can at least wash my face so that I'm not then sneezing and coughing all the time. So, it's something that I factor in, but I don't mention.*

## Theme 5. The aftermath of encounters with dogs in social work practice

The final theme concerns follow-up from employers and other professionals after a dog incident, reflecting disillusionment from most respondents. The social worker, previously discussed, who was bitten resulting in a five-day hospital stay reported:

> *The police in this incident completely minimised what had happened, … he sort of said 'Well we've been to the home, and we don't deem the dog to be a dangerous dog*

Follow-up from her employers was similarly found to be lacking:

> *I was signed off work by the hospital, I left hospital with a drain in my leg. I've worked for them for six years; I've never ever had any time off sick and sent a sick note to HR to say obviously I've been signed off and didn't hear anything back so tried following it up after about a week or so….Eventually after a week or so I got through to somebody and she was like 'yeah we did get it' and that was it*

Another practitioner also bitten in a home with resident children was told by the Police that 'if you are a professional you choose to enter someone else's property,' a direct contravention of the Dangerous Dogs Act, which caused her to feel defeated by the lack of process.

For those social workers whose workplaces had protocols, these amounted to little more than 'filling out an accident form' and it was in

this area that respondents to the research most reported an urgent need for further education and support.

## Discussion

From a review of the literature, this study appears to be the first of its kind to explicitly investigate social workers' practice encounters with dogs.

The study is restricted by the limited size of the data set, with a total of forty-three responses to the survey, and also by the generic nature of the participants involved, who worked in both adults and children's social work, with one participant currently working in Higher Education. This broad range precluded a forensic analysis of the specific issues presenting for children's or adults' social workers when encountering dogs in their practice.

However, despite these limitations, it is significant that forty-three busy social work practitioners gave the time to respond to the survey, and thirteen agreed to a follow-up interview. This suggests that the topic is important for social workers, which was confirmed by the interview participants, who all specified that dogs were a significant practice issue and one which requires greater investigation.

In the light of this, it is interesting to consider why dogs, despite being a common presence in social work, remain absent from the literature. One possible answer lies within the generally overwhelming nature of contemporary social work. This is highlighted in Ravalier et al.'s study (2021) which found that social workers experience chronically deficient working conditions, whilst more contemporary research shows a continuing downward trend in social worker's job satisfaction (Samuel 2024). Within this recurrently poor context, where social workers are attempting to do more with less (Samuel 2024) it is difficult for them to adequately address the complexity of the work. This can result in the potential disassociation discussed by Ferguson (2017) which found that, in some cases, practice was neither sufficiently robust nor complete. Within this context where even children can at times be 'invisible' to workers (Ferguson 2017), the potential risks and equally the potential relational advantages of dogs, discussed by participants in this study, are unlikely to feature as a priority.

This absence was also illustrated by a lack of training for social workers around dogs in the home, with all forty-three participants in this study stating that they had no training on working with dogs within their practice. When dog incidents occurred, the social workers involved reported indifferent agency responses, with an apparent lack of organizational concern or follow-up. At a surface level, such responses could be attributed to shortage of time and resources. However, at a deeper level

it seems possible that it may also indicate organizational defence. Anna Freud (1993) famously characterized defence mechanisms as the ego's way of unconsciously decreasing stress when threatened by overwhelming emotions or situations and although her work was concerned with individuals it can be applied to organizations, which are similarly struggling to cope with the demands of those who use services, resource implications and the wellbeing of their workers. Behaviours including fragmentation and depersonalization were also identified as defences in Menzies Lyth's groundbreaking study (1988) and these are discernible in some of the lack of attention paid to cultural and health issues around dogs, as well as the dearth of research on the topic.

One of the only agency resources offered was the 'hazard warning database' which social workers were meant to check before visiting homes. However, social workers in the research admitted to bypassing this resource. This too can be seen superficially as a resource and time issue, but given the relationship between social workers and their employers reported by Samuel (2024) it is also possible that this behaviour indicates some level of paranoid schizoid functioning, with social workers splitting off the resources that the organizational 'bad object' requires them to use (Klein 1946).

Deep-rooted concepts of risk, care and control (Alfandari et al. 2023) which lie at the heart of social work practice, were also reflected as tensions within the study, through the conflict between dogs as a means of relationship building, whilst also presenting a significant and often volatile risk. This was evidenced by social workers who had been bitten by dogs that they had previously petted. Social workers in the study, lacking training, made their decisions on care and control, largely through whether they deemed themselves to be 'dog lovers' or otherwise. This in turn heightened risks to the social workers and to the families they were visiting, since those who were 'dog lovers' admitted they could be distracted by the dog, thereby missing important factors in the visit, whilst potentially placing themselves at greater risk through a less cautious approach to the dogs. The desire to build a 'holding relationship' (Ferguson et al. 2022) with users of services, could also result in social workers placing themselves at further risk by taking dogs home when people that they were working with were indisposed. Within the study, there seemed to be a lack of organizational intervention on this practice, with employers once more potentially employing the role of defence through turning a blind eye (Rustin 2015).

Social workers in the study also echoed recent research evidence (Samuel 2024) suggesting that they were dispensable in the way that other professional practitioners were not, as they were neither trained to deal with dogs on visits, nor provided with protective equipment or adequate procedures. An additional issue for scrutiny exposed by the study is the implication of allocating social workers with significant phobias,

PTSD, religious and cultural issues, to work involving contact with dogs. Since anti-oppressive practice is one of the core principles of social work, with the Professional Capabilities Framework (BASW 2024) stating that social workers should 'routinely integrate the principles of and entitlements to social justice, social inclusion and equality' these potentially unrecognized cultural and health issues require much further debate.

One clear and perhaps dominant finding from the research, demonstrated by the willingness of participants to give their time, is the need to provide opportunities for social workers to share their narratives of encounters with dogs. This formed one of the key themes in the study and is echoed by Ryan and Ziebland (2015) who focussed on the ways in which domestic animals featured in participant's narrative accounts of their lived experiences, finding that pets have an emotional and embodied place at the core of lives and relationships. The same is true of the narratives of the social workers within this study. Providing further opportunities to share these narratives could help to break down the organizational and individual defences discussed, rendering the invisible, visible, and thereby improving processes and practices in this under-researched area.

## Conclusion

This article has discussed findings from a mixed-methods study focussed on social workers' encounters with dogs in social work practice. The study was explorative in nature and sought to uncover the significance of this issue for social workers in their day-to-day practice, particularly given the lack of previous study. Interest in the survey, indicated by the response rate and willingness to participate in follow-up interviews, suggests that social workers are sufficiently concerned by this issue to spare their precious and limited time. The study has exposed a multiplicity of themes, each one of which is linked to other issues in the profession and could benefit from greater study. Although research participants were divided on whether there was a need for specific training, there was an obvious drive to share narratives of practice encounters with dogs, as well as a consensus that this area of practice needs much greater attention and further research, in order to adequately support social workers. As one research participant summarized this:

> *It needs to be a fundamental part of social work.*

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