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Characterising the un-owned pet population in the UK

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Background

Currently the number of dogs and cats in the UK is unknown, although estimates suggest the number of owned dogs and cats to be in the region of 8-10 million for each species (Murray et al., 2010; PFMA, 2010). However, the extent of the un-owned population, comprising strays, ferals and those in shelters and foster care, is currently unknown.

The relationship between the owned and un-owned population is dynamic, with strays and shelter animals being adopted into households, and pet animals being relinquished or abandoned. Un-owned dogs and cats can exist in a variety of environments (Figure 1). These animals may have an increased risk of disease due to stress, poor nutrition, lack of veterinary care and, when housed in shelters, proximity to other animals. It has been suggested that domestic animals may be important in the spread of diseases such as rabies if introduced to the British Isles, and un-owned animals could provide an important reservoir and route of transmission in such circumstances.

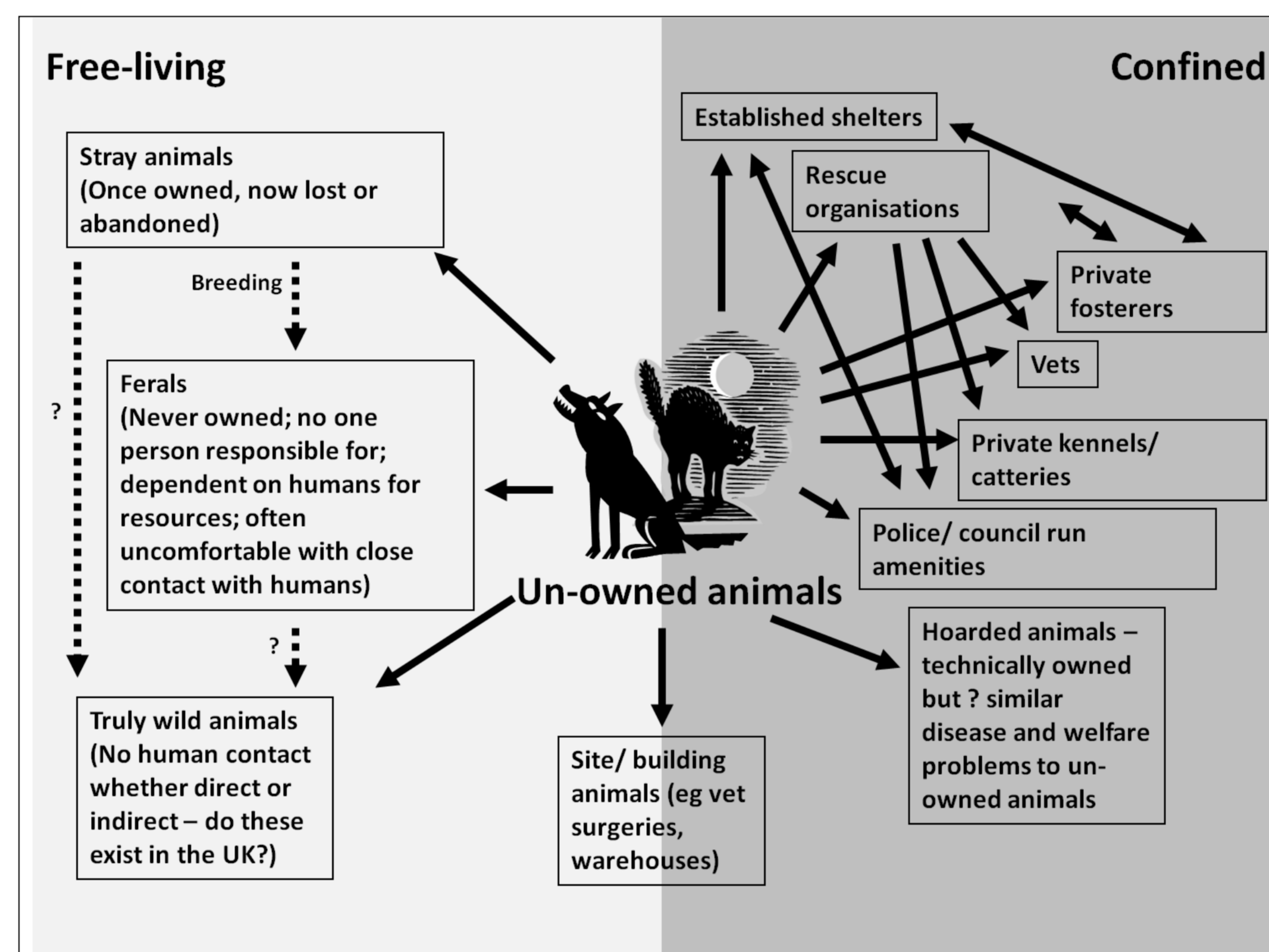


Figure 1: summary of different un-owned dog and cat populations in the UK



Aim

The study aim is to estimate the number of un-owned dogs and cats in the UK. A secondary aim is to foster a working relationship between the research group and the 'shelter' community, in order to promote the possibility of future research.

Materials and Methods

1. Sampling frame

- England and Wales Charity Commission
- Scottish Charity Commission
- Catchat
- The Dog Rescue Pages

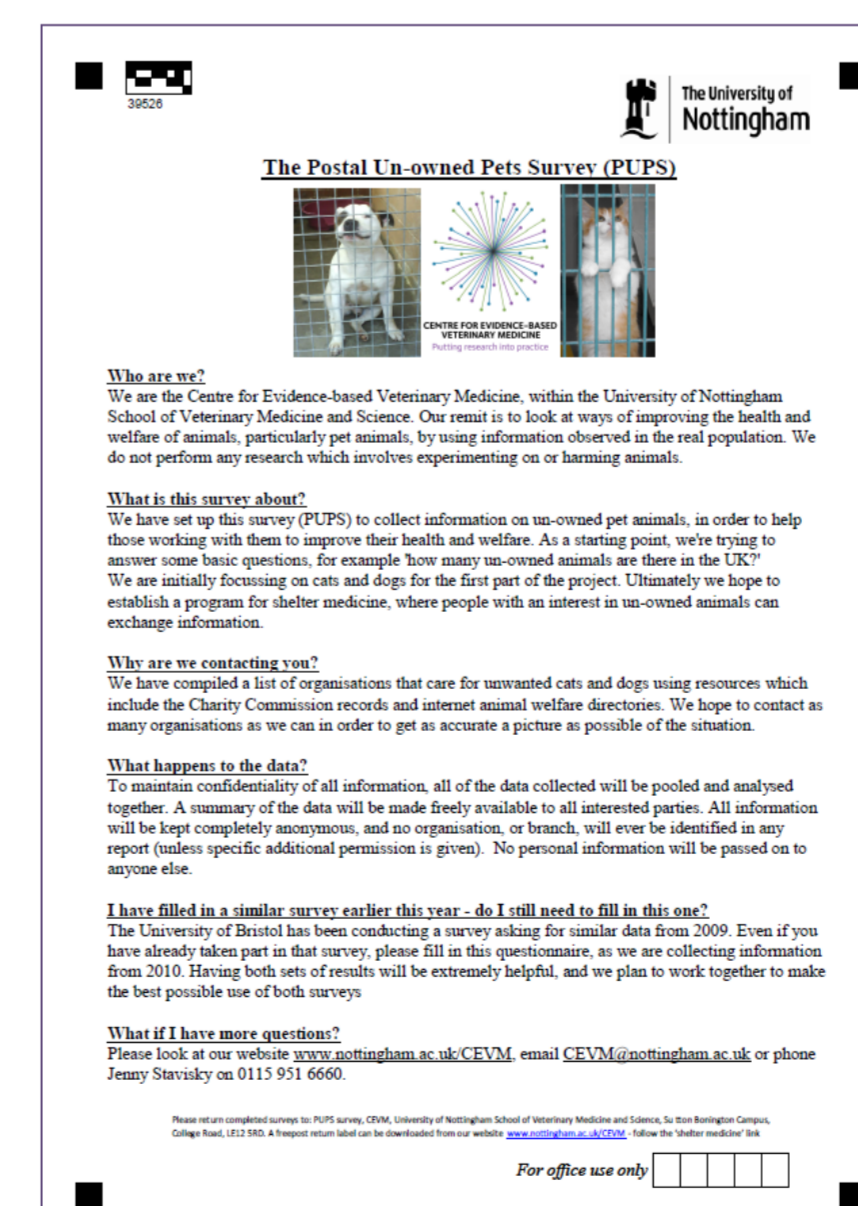
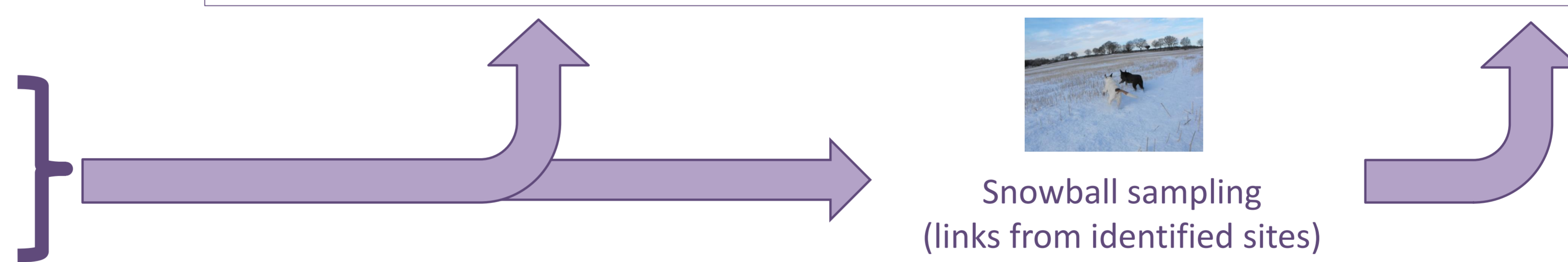
2. Questionnaire

- Designed using automated reading software (Cardiff Teleform)
- Piloted with a variety of shelter professionals and volunteers (n=7)
- Distributed by post for 2025 organisations for which postal addresses were available
- Telephone calls and emails to 561 others to obtain postal address

3. Compliance

- Visits to shelters and umbrella organisations to publicise project
- Articles in Veterinary Times, Veterinary Record, Veterinary Business Journal
- Website with downloadable PDF of questionnaire and prepaid return envelope
- Facebook profile for project, with links to main project website
- Incentives included with questionnaire (chocolate and pen)

Database (~2500 organisations)
Rescue, shelter, fostering, sanctuary and care of ferals/ strays



Conclusion

Database of UK cat and dog 'shelters' compiled using available sampling frames and a modified snowball sampling technique
This will be used to carry out a census of the un-owned cat and dog population in the UK
Both the methodology used and data collection to be a springboard for further work involving this important population of animals

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References

Murray, J. K., Browne, W. J., Roberts, M. A., Whitmarsh, A., Gruffydd-Jones, T. J. (2010). "Number and ownership profiles of cats and dogs in the UK." Veterinary Record 166(6): 163-168
Pet Food Manufacturers Association Annual Report (2010) http://www.pfma.org.uk/about_us/index.cfm?id=65 Accessed 18.01.2010