



RSPCA  **FOR
EVERY
KIND.**

Animal Kindness Index 2026

The **Animal Kindness Index** is an annual UK-wide survey exploring public attitudes toward animals. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SSPCA), and the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (USPCA) all use these findings to inform their advocacy work, raise awareness about animal welfare issues, and help build a more compassionate world where all animals can live a good life.



Key findings

Our 2026 report shows that we're seeing a growing awareness of animal sentience, a continued recognition of the importance of animal welfare, and a growing appreciation of how some human actions can impact animals negatively. This is a huge positive for the RSPCA as we continue to inspire everyone to create a better world for every animal. However, concerns around the cost of pet ownership remain significant, and new findings on the impact of artificial intelligence on our relationship with animals, highlight a possible issue to watch.

What we're encouraged by

We continue to be a nation of animal lovers

Over the last few years, we've seen a steady increase in the number of adults identifying as animal lovers, a positive step for the future of animal welfare. This year, 72% of adults identified as an animal lover, an encouraging 3% increase in 2022.

72% 
of Brits are animal lovers

↑ up from 71% in 2025

For children and young people, the picture remains very positive. In 2026, 86% identified as animal lovers, an impressively high figure. While this is a 3% decrease compared to 2025, the overall level of love towards animals from the younger generation remains strong.

Animal welfare is the second most important cause for the public

Over the past four years, animal welfare has remained in the top three causes of importance for the public, and that's no different in 2026. This year, animal welfare is the second most important cause, with 32% placing animal welfare in their top three most important causes, ahead of physical health (29%) and behind mental health (35%)¹. Children and young people also place care for animal welfare highly. They care most that people are happy and healthy and that all animals are well cared for (both 62%), followed by taking care of our planet (45%).



¹ This question also included climate change as an option for the first time in 2026. Existing options are: animal welfare; human rights; conservation and protecting the environment; global poverty; children and young people; poverty in the UK; religion; education; physical health; mental health.

More animals are being recognised as sentient

We're seeing a growing awareness of animal sentience. We define this as an animal's capacity to experience both positive and negative feelings, such as pleasure, joy, pain and distress. Since last year, there have been a number of significant increases in recognition of sentience in individual species. For example, understanding of sentience in lobsters has increased by 9% to 54%, and this means that more of the public believe lobsters are sentient than they do salmon (49%). Public recognition of the sentience of all the species we asked about increased, apart from dogs, which remains the same as last year (94%). These increases are encouraging to see and we hope to see a further increase in future surveys.

Call for stronger government action

In a climate where societal concern for animal welfare is rising and many pet owners are feeling financial pressure, it's unsurprising that expectations for stronger government action are growing. Responsibility for animal welfare is increasingly placed on the government (69%), alongside those working with animals (69%), and NGOs and charities (45%).



What we're concerned about

People lack the confidence to help sick or injured wildlife

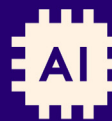
Of those who haven't previously found sick, injured or trapped wildlife, 55% wouldn't feel confident about knowing how to help them. This highlights the need to increase public awareness and knowledge around how to respond and to provide appropriate support to wildlife in need.

75% £ £ £ £ £
£ £ £ £ £

of pet owners say the cost of looking after their pet in the past 12 months has become more expensive

Pet care is more expensive than last year

As costs continue to rise, it's not surprising that 75% of pet owners state that the cost of looking after their pet has become more expensive over the past 12 months. While this figure has declined since 2023, it remains a 7% increase from 2022.

10% 

of pet owners seek advice and support from AI

The growing use of artificial intelligence

One-tenth (10%) of pet owners now seek advice and support around looking after their pet from artificial intelligence sources, such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude and Perplexity. While vets (64%) still remain the primary source of advice, it's concerning to see such a significant percentage of pet owners turn to AI sources for information and guidance, particularly as assessment of problems and treatments in an animal can only be accurately diagnosed in person by a skilled vet.

Of the 27% who've witnessed animal cruelty online in the past 12 months, 13% believe the content they saw was AI-generated.

The number of meat eaters is growing

In 2026, 68% of the public identify as meat eaters, up 6% on 2022. Meanwhile, 16% identify as flexitarians, 6% as vegetarian and 2% as vegan.



Pet owners

Owning pets

As a nation of animal lovers, it's not surprising that over one-half of us (51%) are pet owners, although this is a 3% decline on last year. This year, ownership of dogs dropped by 4% and cats by 2%, after a rise in 2025. We've also seen a steady decline in ownership of fish, small mammals, birds and reptiles since 2022. This is very likely due to the rising cost of living, making pet ownership a cost some are now unable to afford. Against this backdrop, recent policy changes may help to ease some barriers to pet ownership. The Renters' Rights Act came into force in England on 1 May 2026. This strengthens tenants' rights to keep pets in their homes by prohibiting blanket bans on no pets and allowing renters to request a pet in writing, which landlords cannot unreasonably refuse².

Among dog owners, registered breeders (35%) remain the most common source of where they got their pet, followed by rehoming centres (20%), friends and family (19%), and online marketplaces (15%). However, cat owners are more likely to acquire pets through rehoming centres (32%) or from friends and family (26%).

Financial concerns

In line with pet ownership, it's not surprising that more pet owners are reporting that their pet ownership costs are increasing. Three-quarters (75%) of pet owners say the cost of looking after their pet has become more expensive in the past 12 months. This has increased since 2022 (68%), which saw the lowest score, but is starting to level out after the highest levels, seen in 2023 (81%).

As the cost of caring for pets has increased, so have pet owners' worries about affording to meet their pet's needs. Although 18% are worried about being able to afford to feed their pet, the biggest worries are around being able to afford their pet's vet bills (56%), and being able to afford their pet's insurance (34%). Worries about vet bills have seen the biggest increase over the last two years, increasing from 49% in 2024. Following a two-and-a-half-year investigation, the UK Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) published its final report in March 2026³, concluding that the veterinary market is not working well for pet owners, due to high prices, lack of transparency and limited competition. The report found that the cost of veterinary services rose by 63% between 2016 and 2023, with practices owned by large veterinary groups charging on average 16.6% more than independent vets.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-renters-rights-act-information-sheet-2026>

³ <https://www.countryside-alliance.org/news-content-type/vet-bills-tackled-by-competition-authority>



Year on year, we're seeing fewer pet owners accessing veterinary care. This year, 64% of pet owners say they vaccinate their pets each year (down from 68% in 2025); 68% take their pet for an annual check up (down from 71% in 2025); 77% give their pet regular flea treatment (down from 80% in 2024); and 53% insure their pets (down from 54% in 2025). These fluctuations remain consistent with the increasing financial pressures associated with pet ownership. However, some actions remain stable or have improved. For example, the proportion of pet owners registering their pets with a vet is unchanged from last year at 89% (it has increased by 4% since 2022), while those who microchip their pets continues to increase, now reaching 83%. It is now a legal requirement for both cats and dogs to be microchipped.

In total, 10% of pet owners have cut back on their own food and other necessities to feed or care for their pet. However, when we look at this by income, the figure rises to 18% for those on up to £20,000 a year, and 13% for those on an income of

£20,000–£30,000. With the cost of living expected to rise further, we're concerned about what this means for people who are already struggling to look after their pet. This growing financial pressure is also reflected in the increasing number of animals reported as neglected to the RSPCA and the rising demand for support services, such as the RSPCA's pet food banks⁴, which help owners struggling to meet their pet's basic needs. In 2026, so far over 65,000 pet meals have been provided for dogs and cats, supporting around 7,500 pet owners. Since the initiative began in January 2022, more than 2.7 million pet meals have been distributed, supporting over 306,000 people. While fewer owners report concerns about feeding their pets compared to other costs, the scale of this support highlights the difficult trade-offs many are facing and the growing need for practical assistance.



This year, 35% of pet owners report having taken cost-related actions in the past 12 months due to financial pressures, including reducing spending on veterinary care (10%), cutting back on their own food

or essentials to afford pet care (10%), and buying pet food less frequently or switching to a cheaper brand (9%). Smaller proportions report seeking pet health advice from AI tools (5%) or stopping vet visits altogether (3%). Among those who have taken such actions, 17% believe their pet has suffered as a result. Although this figure is lower than previous years, it remains a concerning finding. Support is available through the RSPCA's Cost of Living Hub⁵, which provides practical advice, access to pet food bank information, support with vet costs, and tools to help owners manage their pet care expenses.

 **60%** buy Christmas or winter holiday gifts or treats for their pets

 **41%** get birthday or Gotcha Day gifts or treats for their pets

Despite these financial concerns, we still can't help spoiling and treating our pets. Christmas and winter celebrations (60%) and a pet's birthday or 'Gotcha Day' (41%) are the most popular for gift giving. Women are more likely to have ever given their pet a gift or special treat, particularly for Christmas (64% women vs 55% men) and birthdays (46% women vs 36% men). In general, younger groups (18–44 year olds) are more likely to have ever given their pet a gift or special treat than older groups (aged 45+).

⁴ <https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/costofliving/foodbank>

⁵ <https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/costofliving>

64%

of pet owners use
vets as a source for
advice and support



Advice and support

Vets remain the most popular source of advice and support for pet owners (64%), with usage increasing compared to last year. Other commonly used sources include the internet (38%) and family and friends (28%). Reassuringly, there's been an 8% decrease in searches for "Can I give my dog paracetamol?", suggesting better awareness that pets shouldn't be given human medication without veterinary advice. However, 10% of pet owners now report turning to AI for advice and support. Among those using AI, they most commonly use it to check symptoms when pets are unwell (62%), followed by seeking advice on behaviour and body language (49%) and diet (30%). This finding raises a significant concern around the growing use of AI systems and large language models (LLMs) as sources of information for pet owners. A key risk is inconsistency and 'hallucinations', where systems present incorrect or misleading information as fact. Many users may be unaware of this, causing them to treat the AI response as reliable advice, which could lead to harmful outcomes for their pets. This is particularly worrying when these tools are used in

urgent or stressful situations, as they can be seen as a quicker or cheaper alternative to veterinary advice. However, AI systems can't replace trained medical professionals as they lack clinical or diagnostic expertise, instead generating responses based on patterns in data rather than individual cases.

There are notable differences in this area by income and age. Pet owners on lower incomes are less likely to seek advice from a vet compared to those on higher incomes (52% of those on incomes up to £20k vs 75% of those on incomes £60k+). Patterns also vary across age groups: younger pet owners tend to draw on a wider range of advice sources overall. While vets remain the top source across all ages, usage is lowest among those aged 18–24, a trend that mirrors the income differences. In contrast, AI use is highest among those aged 25–34 (17%).

The Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Animal Welfare, part of the RSPCA's Animal Futures Project⁶, set out a clear vision and roadmap for change, including a recommendation to improve public awareness of responsible pet ownership. It called for professionally delivered campaigns to help people understand the commitments involved *before* getting a pet, leading to healthier animals and fewer cases of abandonment, neglect, and mistreatment. Rising costs and limited awareness of animals' specialist needs have contributed to a 51% increase in the number of abandoned pets reported to the RSPCA over the past three years. To be effective, the concept of 'responsible pet ownership' must be clearly defined and consistently promoted by government, enforcement agencies, animal welfare experts, and pet owners.

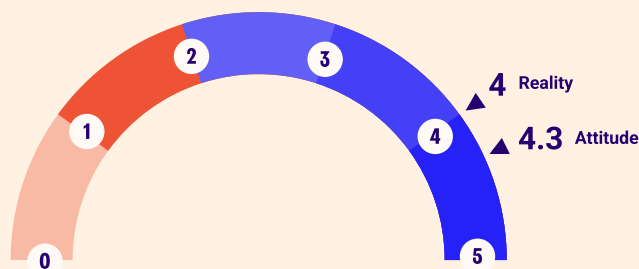


⁶<https://www.rspca.org.uk/whatwedo/latest/animalfutures/recommendations>

Reality Check

The results

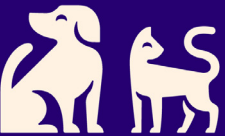
Our findings from the Animal Kindness Index survey resulted in a score of 4.3 out of 5, with our analysis of real-life data scoring 4 out of 5.



What we found out

Our data analysis highlights several positive trends in both public attitudes towards and the realities of pet care. A strong majority (79%) of the UK public opposes breeding practices that result in exaggerated physical features in animals, such as short noses, long backs, short legs, or excessive skin folds. However, these positive attitudes are not always reflected by dog ownership patterns. In the UK, it's estimated that over 20% of the dog population are breeds with at least one extreme conformation. And this is likely to be a large

underestimation as these figures don't reflect animals of cross- or mixed breeds who may also have these features. Although it's positive that a clear majority of people oppose breeding practices that result in extreme conformation, there's still a disconnect between public attitudes and the reality of one-fifth of the public owning dogs with extreme features.

79% 
oppose breeding practices
that result in exaggerated
physical features

Encouragingly, the Animal Kindness Index shows that most UK pet owners are taking positive steps to care for their animals. This year shows that 78% of UK pet owners worm their pets; 79% groom them when needed; 64% vaccinate them every year; 77% have neutered or spayed their pets; 77% give their pets regular flea treatment; 68% get taken to an annual check-up; 95% give their pet the right amount of food for their species/type; and 88%

give their pets daily exercise or stimulation. The PDSA PAW Report⁷ demonstrates that preventative healthcare also remains relatively high, with booster vaccinations maintained by 81% of dog owners, 67% of cat owners, and 61% of rabbit owners. Similarly, it estimates that 64% of dogs, 84% of cats, and 59% of rabbits are neutered or spayed.

Overall, this analysis paints a largely positive picture of public attitudes and behaviours towards companion animals. There's clear opposition to breeding practices that compromise animal welfare, alongside generally strong adherence to basic standards of care. However, the continued presence of breeds associated with inherited health issues suggests a persistent gap between what people believe and the choices they make in practice.⁸

⁷<https://www.pdsa.org.uk/media/15783/pdsa-paw-mini-report-2025.pdf>

⁸For pet owners, our attitudes analysis looked at: the recognition of emotional experiences in companion animals (94% recognised this); basic care maintenance (an average of 78% of pet owners maintain basic care for their pets); opposition to breeding pets with genetic health problems (79% oppose this).

As a reality check for pet owners, we looked at: basic care maintenance from the 2025 PDSA PAW report; Kennel Club 2025 breed registration statistics for breeds with genetic health problems (brachycephalics and Dachshunds); the available government guidance regarding responsible pet ownership and breeding.



Citizens

A surge in compassion and advocacy

Our love for animals continues to rise, with 72% of the public identifying as animal lovers, part of a steady upward trend since 2024. This growing appreciation is also reflected in wider attitudes, with animal welfare now ranked as the second most important cause to individuals (32%), behind mental health (35%). Notably, this is the first time animal welfare has reached the top two, highlighting its increasing priority with the public. In line with this, 63% of the UK public disagree with the statement: “animal welfare is not a priority for me”, up from 59% last year.

86%



of children and young people are animal lovers

↓ decreased from 89% in 2025

Among children and young people, 86% identify as animal lovers. This has remained consistently high and broadly in line with previous years, despite a small 3% decrease since last year. This change appears to be influenced primarily by responses from those without pets, although identification as animal lovers among non-pet owners remains higher than in 2024. This suggests that pet ownership may help foster particularly strong connections with animals. Animal welfare is also highly valued among younger audiences, ranking among their top priorities (62%), together with ensuring people are happy and healthy.

These overall trends are shaped by demographic differences. Women, people aged 45–54, and people living in Wales, are most likely to identify as animal lovers. Similarly, women, people aged 45+, and Welsh residents, are more likely to consider animal welfare an important cause. In contrast, animal welfare ranks lower in importance for males (fifth) and those aged 18–24 (sixth).

Encouragingly, there's been a notable increase in the proportion of people who consider certain uses of animals to be unacceptable. In particular, those who view the use of animals for entertainment in shows as unacceptable has risen by 7% to 61%, aligning with a 9% decline in viewership for *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!* for 2025. Opposition to dressing animals in clothing for fashion rather than warmth has also increased by 4% to 60%. Attitudes towards the use of animals in TV and film are more mixed.



60%

consider it unacceptable to dress animals in clothing for fashion or fun rather than warmth

↑ increase of 4% from 2025



61%

consider it unacceptable to use animals in entertainment

↑ increase of 7% from 2025

While the proportion who consider it unacceptable to use real wild animals instead of digital alternatives has decreased by 6%, this remains relatively low at 33%, indicating greater acceptance of this practice compared to other forms of animal use. More broadly, around one-half of the public (49%) find the use of animals in racing or sport unacceptable. There is also strong opposition to the use of electric shock collars, which are used as an aversive training method on some pets, with 81% considering them unacceptable. In contrast, only 35% view the use of traps to kill animals such as mice or rats as unacceptable, highlighting a clear gap in public awareness and underscoring the need for targeted education and stronger policy interventions to address the welfare implications of these practices.



In its Animal Welfare Strategy for England⁹, the UK Government has committed to considering the recommendations of the Responsible Dog Ownership Taskforce, which focus on education, training for dogs and their owners, enforcement, and data collection. The Strategy also commits to consulting on whether to ban the use of electric shock collars due to the welfare implications of this aversive training method.

Taking action for animals

In the past 12 months, 79% of people report having taken at least one action to help animals. The most common actions include feeding birds (49%), reducing the purchase or use of single-use plastics (37%), creating habitats for wildlife in their gardens (27%), and buying products with higher animal welfare standards (20%). Notably, the proportion reducing the use of single-use plastic has fallen by 3% compared to last year. Since 2022, several actions have declined more notably. Participation in behaviours such as donating to or purchasing from animal charities (-4%), creating wildlife habitats (-4%), and buying higher-welfare products (-3%) have decreased. Larger declines are seen in reducing or stopping meat consumption (-11%), as well as sharing missing pets on social media and taking part in animal welfare campaigns (both -5%). While everyday actions such as reducing the use of single-use plastics remain relatively common, the overall downward trend across a range of behaviours suggests a gradual decline in active engagement with animal welfare over time. This may indicate that

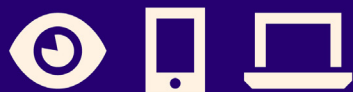
people don't always make the connection between these actions and animal welfare outcomes, instead perceiving them as standalone environmental or climate-focused behaviours. To create 'a better world for every animal', the RSPCA needs the public's support in building a stronger, more active movement for animal welfare. While many people are already taking action to help animals in their communities, there's a clear opportunity to grow this further, mobilising more people who are ready, willing and able to make a difference, and in doing so, driving an even greater impact for animals.

Well over three-quarters (83%) of children and young people report having ever done at least one action to help animals. Their overall activity levels are similar to last year, with girls most likely to put out food for the birds, read or watch content about being kind to animals, and build hedgehog houses. We've seen a small but positive increase in children asking owners before stroking their dogs, showing better awareness of how to behave around animals. These trends point



⁹<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/animal-welfare-strategy-for-england/animal-welfare-strategy-for-england>

to an opportunity to re-engage the public in accessible, everyday actions that support animals and nature. The RSPCA's Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Animal Welfare's recommendation for a community habitat service reflects this opportunity, proposing local, practical ways for people to get involved in restoring and protecting wildlife spaces¹⁰. Supporting people to take action not only benefits animals, but also has wider gains for physical and mental wellbeing, and strengthens people's connection to the natural environment as a shared space with wildlife.



7% decrease in those witnessing animal cruelty in a documentary or on reality TV

↓ 18%, down from 25% in 2022

Witnessing animal cruelty in the digital age

Worryingly, over the past 12 months, 39% of the UK public have witnessed a form of animal cruelty. Despite this being a decrease compared to last year (-3%), this is still a concerning figure.

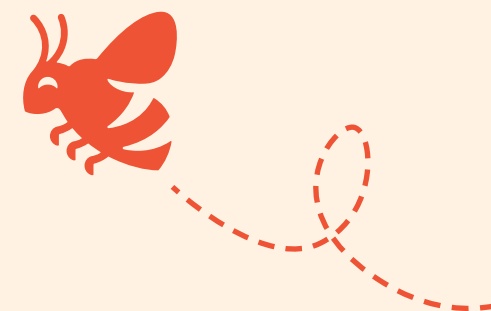
It's important to note that figures are higher among younger age categories, with 47% of 18–24 year olds having witnessed animal cruelty.

Overall, 27% of people report having witnessed animal cruelty online, with higher prevalence among younger age groups, particularly those aged 18–24 (40%). Of those who've witnessed animal cruelty, this was most likely to have occurred on social media (24%), closely followed by documentaries and reality TV (18%). Reassuringly, there's been a steady decline in the number of people witnessing animal cruelty in a documentary or on reality TV, falling from 25% in 2022. The most common platforms for exposure are Facebook (37%) and Instagram (23%). While exposure on Instagram has increased by 5% since last year, there are some reassuring declines elsewhere. Reports of witnessing animal cruelty on Facebook have fallen by 9% since 2022. Smaller declines were also seen on X (-4%) and YouTube (-5%), while reports have increased on Instagram (+13%) and TikTok (+3%) since 2022.

Of those who've witnessed animal cruelty online, 13% believe the content may have been generated by AI and 37% didn't know if it had been generated by AI, highlighting emerging challenges in identifying and verifying harmful digital content. While AI-generated content currently reflects a small proportion of the animal cruelty witnessed, it's concerning to see this response. AI-generated animal cruelty risks normalising harm across online and social media spaces. Exposure to this type of content can desensitise viewers to distress, making it harder to recognise genuine animal welfare concerns and

distorting the public's understanding of animals' true needs. Of the 39% who witnessed animal cruelty in the past 12 months, only around one-fifth (22%) reported the cruelty that they saw.

After a rise in 2025, there's been a decrease in the number of children who report having seen someone hurting an animal, now at 31% (-6% from 2025). Children and young people's exposure to animal cruelty content online increases with age, with 13–15 year olds driving the 2026 figures. Encouragingly, 52% of those who witnessed this behaviour say they reported it. For children and young people, YouTube is the most commonly reported platform where they witnessed someone hurting an animal (52%), followed by TikTok (37%), while Snapchat (13%) and Reddit (5%) are much lower. This likely reflects differences in platform use.



¹⁰<https://www.rspca.org.uk/whatwedo/latest/animalfutures/recommendations>

Priorities, protection and perception

Stopping the illegal puppy trade and ending harmful dog breeding practices are consistently seen as the most pressing animal welfare priorities (both 38%). Legislators responded to this issue by introducing the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Act 2025¹¹. This legislation bans the import into Great Britain of young puppies and kittens under six months of age. This, alongside 79% opposing breeding practices that result in exaggerated physical features in animals (e.g. short noses, long backs, short legs, and skin folds), reflects strong public concern around both the exploitation of companion animals and the welfare issues associated with irresponsible breeding systems, particularly those that prioritise appearance over health. In the UK, it's estimated that over 20% of the dog population are breeds with at least one extreme conformation, which is likely to be a large underestimation as these figures don't reflect animals of cross- or mixed breeds who may also have these features. From 2014–2025, there was a nine-fold increase in the numbers of pugs and French bulldogs coming into the RSPCA's care, and from 2020–2025 there were increases of 138% and 89% in British shorthair and Persian cats, respectively, coming into our care.

Just under one-third (32%) highlight the importance of shifting food systems away from intensive agricultural methods, such as pig farrowing crates and cages for laying hens, indicating concern about farmed animal welfare within industrial production

systems. A smaller but still notable proportion (11%) identify banning greyhound racing as a key issue, suggesting that while concern about the greyhound industry exists, it's more concentrated among specific audience groups, rather than the wider public. In Scotland and Wales, legislation has already been passed to ban greyhound racing, and we're urging the UK Government to implement a ban in England too.

In terms of perceptions of animal sentience, there have been several notable and statistically significant increases since 2025, across a range of species.

- Chickens (76%, +4%)
- Lobsters (54%, +9%)
- Rats (73%, +6%)
- Snakes (57%, +8%)
- Spiders (42%, +8%)
- Octopuses (71%, +8%)

These shifts suggest a broadening public understanding of animal sentience beyond traditional 'high-sentience' species, such as cats and dogs. While, as expected, recognition of dog sentience remains extremely high and stable at 94%, the welcome change is the increasing understanding that lobsters, snakes and octopuses are sentient, indicating a clear insight into their ability to feel pain. Understanding of sentience in lobsters has increased by 9%, meaning that more people believe lobsters are sentient than they do salmon. Sadly, British laws protecting their sentience have yet to



mirror this belief, demonstrating the need to improve how they're kept and slaughtered. Nearly one-half of respondents (49%) recognise salmon as sentient, but governments remain far behind public feeling, with promised humane slaughter legislation for aquatic animals still yet to be introduced. These findings point to a gradual but meaningful expansion in public awareness of animal sentience, alongside strong and consistent concern for both companion and farmed animal welfare. The upward trends across multiple species are particularly encouraging, as they suggest growing openness to scientific understandings of animal cognition.

¹¹<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2025/30>

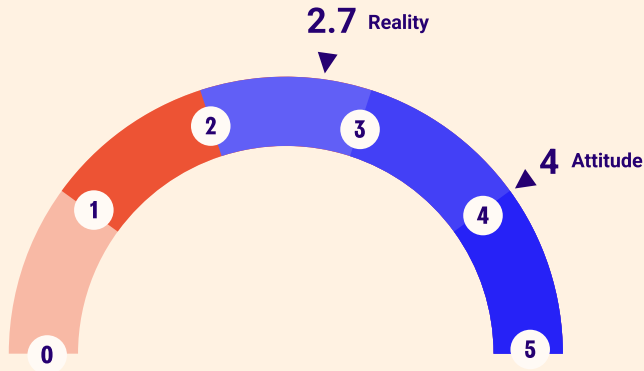


Among children and young people, perceptions of animals' ability to feel pain and emotions are much higher than perceptions of their ability to communicate with humans. The largest gaps were seen for hedgehogs (66% for the former vs 15% for the latter), rabbits (75% vs 29%), cows (73% vs 33%) and outdoor birds (65% vs 25%). Looking at change over the last three years for children and young people, there's been a positive increase in recognition that some animals can feel pain and emotions, particularly for horses and donkeys (up 4% to 79%), rabbits (up 3% to 75%) and hedgehogs (up 4% to 66%). In contrast, recognition has declined for snakes (down 4% to 50%), spiders (down 5% to 39%) and worms (down 7% to 34%). When it comes to beliefs about animals being able to communicate with humans, there have been increases for some species, including horses and donkeys (up 4% to 51%), birds (up 10% to 50% for indoor birds and up 4% to 25% for outdoor birds), and octopuses (up 7% to 25%).

Reality Check

The results

To measure the kindness of citizens, we focused on animal sentience and set the goal as 'animal sentience is recognised and actions taken by the public to support this'. Our findings from the Animal Kindness Index 2026 survey resulted in an 'attitudes' score of 4 out of 5 for this goal, while our analysis of real-life data scored 2.7 out of 5.



What we found out

Overall, public attitudes and behaviours continue to highlight notable inconsistencies.

The Animal Kindness Index shows that 61% of people oppose the use of animals in entertainment, an increase on 2025, however only 33% of people think that it's unacceptable to use real wild animals in entertainment formats, rather than digital alternatives. Encouragingly, 72% of people now identify as animal lovers. However, this sentiment is not always reflected in behaviour, with donations to UK animal charities falling by 7%¹², and just 35% of people thinking it's unacceptable to use traps to catch rats or mice.

¹²For citizens, our attitudes analysis looked at: the recognition of emotional experiences in animals (average of 66%); identifying as an animal lover (72%); animal welfare as a priority (63%) and an important cause to the respondent (second); the perceived acceptability of using animals in entertainment shows (61% view this as unacceptable). As a reality check for citizens, we looked at: viewing figures and Ofcom complaints for *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!*; interest in and attendance at horse and greyhound racing events; charitable investments.



Consumers



Eating habits

With physical health ranking as the third most important cause for the public, it's clear that consumer choice plays an important role in people's daily lives. In line with this broader concern for health and wellbeing, the conditions in which farmed animals are raised in lower-welfare systems are also important to the public. For example, 74% think it's unacceptable to use farrowing crates, 70% think it's unacceptable to keep chickens in cages, and 65% think it's unacceptable to selectively breed fast-growing chickens.

The UK Government's new Animal Welfare Strategy, released in late 2025, plans to phase out enriched colony cages for laying hens and farrowing crates for pigs by 2030. This initiative aims to improve living conditions, with public consultations launching in early 2026 for a potential total ban on cage systems. This was supported by the RSPCA's Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Animal Welfare, which recommended increasing welfare standards for farmed animals. The recommendation called for happy, healthy and free-range animals to become the norm and for farmers to be supported in enacting higher welfare standards; for the banning of cages for all livestock; reduced transport time; incentives and support to produce slower-growing breeds of livestock; and ensuring imported meat and all animal products should meet or beat UK welfare standards.

The number of people self-designating as meat eaters is rising. Over two-thirds of the population (68%) now consider themselves meat eaters, a 6% increase from 2022, with 16% flexitarian, 6% vegetarian, 4% pescetarian and 2% vegan. The proportion following vegan and vegetarian diets has declined by 1% since 2022 for both groups, while flexitarians have decreased by 3%. Men and people aged over 45 are more likely to be meat eaters than women and younger groups, with 11% of women vegetarian or vegan compared to 5% of men. Dietary choices also vary by age, with older groups (aged 65+) typically consuming less food overall, and younger groups generally more open to more varied dietary habits.

Dietary and buying habits

Despite an increase in people consuming animal products, there's been an encouraging increase in engagement with higher-welfare purchasing. Around 70% say they always or sometimes buy higher-welfare meat, eggs or dairy products, which is a 3% increase and the highest level since 2023. Similarly, 61% say they always or sometimes check labels when buying animal products, to understand how animals have been farmed or kept, an increase of 3% since 2025. A lower proportion of people (37%)

68%



of the UK population now consider themselves meat eaters

↑ 6% increase from 2022

say they always or sometimes buy plant-based alternatives. This points to a clear need for simple, consistent messaging and more transparent labelling to help consumers navigate what can be a confusing space when trying to make informed purchasing decisions. The RSPCA Assured label provides a trusted, straightforward way for consumers to choose higher-welfare products, with the logo helping to cut through complexity and give greater confidence that animals have been farmed to higher welfare standards.

Following the declines seen in 2025 in higher-welfare purchasing and label checking, this year these behaviours returned to 2024 levels. Flexitarians are the most likely to buy higher-welfare animal products (87%), compared to 69% of meat eaters. A similar pattern is seen in label checking, with 81% of flexitarians reporting checking labels when buying animal products and 75% of pescetarians, whereas 57% of meat eaters say they always or sometimes do this. Purchasing of plant-based alternatives is highest among vegetarians and pescetarians (both at 84%), followed by vegans (76%) and flexitarians (66%), compared to just 23% of meat eaters. Overall, this suggests that while meat consumption is increasing, more conscious eating habits are also returning, with flexitarians particularly likely to choose both higher-welfare animal products and plant-based alternatives.

Among children and young people, most report eating animal products, with dairy (97%) and meat (94%) being the most commonly consumed. However, 18% have made changes to their meat consumption and 12% to their fish consumption because of their feelings towards animals. Overall,

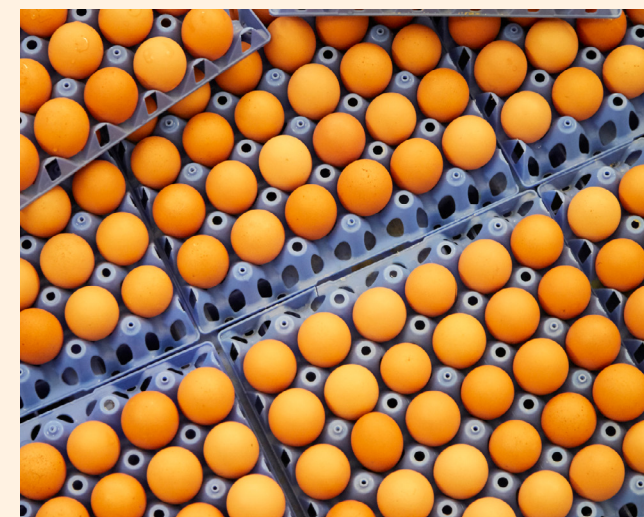
9% say they have decided to eat less meat and fish to help animals, with girls more likely to report this, although there's been a gradual decline in the number of children and young people who say they've decided to stop eating or reduce meat and fish consumption.



The Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Animal Welfare highlights strong public support for welfare labelling, recommending clearer information at the point of purchase so shoppers can make informed choices about animal welfare. This includes mandatory welfare labelling to help shift buying habits. The RSPCA advocates for mandatory method-of-production labelling on all animal products, providing consumers with clear, accessible information on how animals were farmed. This reflects growing public demand for clearer standards and supports more informed, confident consumer choices.

The proportion of people willing to pay more for animal products that explicitly avoid certain practices, such as keeping animals in cages,

beak-trimming, and slaughter without stunning, has remained stable since 2023, but has declined significantly since 2022. There's a fair proportion of people who don't know whether they'd be willing to pay more, which presents an opportunity to further educate and upskill the public on certain farming practices and farmed animal welfare conditions. This contrasts with the rise in label checking and higher-welfare purchasing, suggesting an intention/action gap. While consumers appear more engaged with welfare information at the point of purchase, this doesn't necessarily translate into a sustained willingness to pay a premium for products that guarantee higher welfare standards. With rising food costs, this intention/action gap in purchasing higher-welfare animal products may be driven by cost-of-living pressures. In addition, the wide variety of product certification schemes may create 'choice overload', confusing consumers and limiting their impact on purchasing behaviour.



The RSPCA's Citizens' Assembly highlights that the public want to see those farmers who want their animals to have a 'life worth living' have a better chance to offer this and to be incentivised to improve animal welfare. It recommended that farming standards in the UK need to be raised, but also that farmers need to be supported financially to raise these standards. The Assembly also recommended introducing a transparent labelling scheme for animal products, to ensure that consumers are fully aware of the conditions in which animals are farmed when they're buying animal products. The recommendations from the Citizens' Assembly highlight that when people know the realities of lower-welfare farming, they're willing to change their buying habits.

Earlier this year, we launched the report *Food and farming: Reducing the consumption of animal products*¹³, which draws on the research conducted by the University of Lincoln, looking at how small, gradual dietary changes could have a significant impact on animal welfare and the number of animals farmed. The report highlights that lower-welfare farming is the single biggest animal welfare issue, with over 70% of farmed animals in the UK raised in intensive systems that can cause significant suffering, and that current demand for meat, dairy, eggs and fish is a major driver of this. Reducing animal product consumption by just 3% per year could result in around one billion fewer animals suffering on farms by 2050, alongside environmental benefits such as reduced emissions and land use.

There has, however, been a decline in the proportion of people who report reducing their consumption of animal products or changing their buying habits due to animal welfare concerns.



27%

say they have reduced their consumption of animal products

↓ down 7% from 34% in 2022



23%

take animal welfare into consideration in buying habits

↓ down 5% from 28% in 2022

The share of those who say they've reduced their consumption has fallen by 7% over the past four years (from 34% to 27%), while those who've changed their buying habits has decreased by 5% (from 28% to 23%). Women and 18–34 year olds are more likely to report these behaviours, while men and younger people are least likely to change their buying habits or reduce consumption. This highlights an opportunity to improve understanding of how certain practices affect animal welfare, particularly to help men and younger people turn their awareness into more consistent actions and behaviour change.

Rethinking food systems for farmed animal welfare

In 2026, 32% of the public consider a food strategy that moves away from intensive agricultural methods – such as pig crates and cages for laying hens – to be an important animal welfare issue. By contrast, only 12% place a food strategy that reduces the consumption of meat and other animal products in their top three priorities. This suggests that public support for food system change is more focused on industry practices than on individual dietary behaviour. This is reflected in consumer behaviour, with many people continuing to identify as meat eaters while also showing a preference for higher-welfare products. However, only 14% rank intensive farming itself among the top three most important animal welfare issues for the RSPCA to address. This places it behind more immediate or visible concerns, such as investigating animal cruelty and wildlife crime (60%), and rescuing, rehabilitating, and rehoming animals (39%).



32% consider a food strategy that moves away from intensive agricultural methods, such as pig crates and cages for laying hens, to be an important animal welfare issue

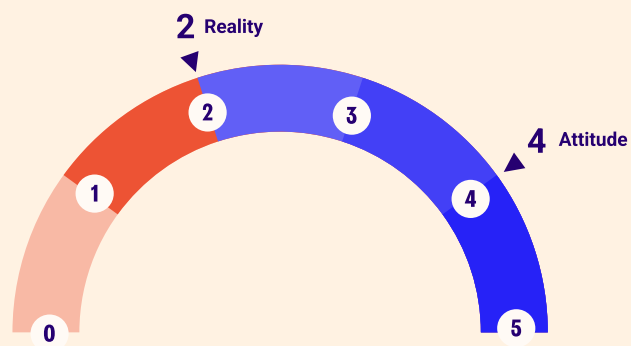
¹³<https://www.rspca.org.uk/documents/1494939/3a32e5dd-9f77-2262-8307-b8be8c2984ee>

Together, these findings suggest a gap in public understanding of farmed animal welfare, particularly for less visible species such as fish. This presents an opportunity to increase awareness of how different farming practices impact animal welfare, with the potential to drive greater willingness to pay for higher-welfare products, particularly among younger audiences.

Reality Check

The results

Our findings from the Animal Kindness Index survey resulted in an 'attitudes' score of 4 out of 5 for consumers, with real-life data scoring 2 out of 5.



What we found out

The consumer reality check reveals a clear gap between values and actions when it comes to farmed animal welfare. While 70% of people say they check meat and dairy labels for welfare or environmental reasons, only 20% report buying higher-welfare products in the past year – highlighting a significant disconnect between intention and behaviour, and the need to better support consumers to act on their concerns.

Currently, just 28% of UK farmed animals are reared under RSPCA Assured standards. As part of our strategic ambition, aim to increase this to 50% by 2050. Our farmed animal welfare standards, among the most comprehensive globally, are independently proven to improve the lives of millions of animals each year, demonstrating the tangible impact of higher-welfare farming when it's adopted at scale¹⁴.

¹⁴For consumers, our attitudes analysis looked at: the frequency of purchase of higher-welfare food products (70% always/sometimes purchase these products); people's reduction in meat, dairy and animal product consumption (an average of 16%); welfare- and environmentally driven motivations for purchase, such as checking labels before purchasing (61%). Reality-wise, we looked at: people who've purchased higher-welfare animal products; the number of species reared on RSPCA Assured farms as a percentage of the UK total for that species.



Role models

A clear public mandate for animal welfare

There is strong public support for protecting animal welfare through legislation, with 86% in agreement and a 5% increase in those who strongly agree since 2025. Women are more likely to consider this important.

86%   

believe animal welfare should be protected through legislation

The UK public considers animal welfare an increasingly important issue for the country right now (56%), which is the highest score since the survey began in 2022. This concern is particularly pronounced among women and people aged 35 and over. The majority believe that responsibility for animal welfare lies with all of us as individuals (78%), and an increasing number believe this responsibility lies with the national government (68%) and those

whose job involves working with animals (69%), both increasing by 5% from 2025. Together, this highlights a clear and growing expectation that everyone has a role to play in animal welfare and that there's a strengthening public mandate for collective action on animal welfare.

This is reflected in the RSPCA's Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Animal Welfare recommendation to strengthen and better enforce wildlife laws, including through stricter penalties and greater use of technology. The RSPCA supports this approach and is also calling for new, consolidated wildlife legislation, as many existing laws are outdated, and penalties for wildlife crimes remain lower than those for companion animal offences.

Learning, awareness and animal welfare

There's a strong consensus around the benefits of teaching animal welfare in educational curricula. An encouraging 88% identify benefits to this and just 4% of people think animal welfare shouldn't be included in a curriculum. The most important benefit identified is that it helps learners understand the impact of their actions on animals (73%), while belief that it increases compassion for animals has continued to rise, reaching 55% in 2026, up 3% from 2023. Alongside strong support for teaching animal welfare in school curricula, there are a range of influences shaping how children and young people learn about animals. Parents and carers (65%) remain the most common source of information, followed by teachers (50%), then books and friends (both 43%). We greatly encourage parents and carers to engage with and

develop their child's practical animal care skills over time, helping young people develop a sense of responsibility.



Animal welfare will always be our priority. The public identifies investigating animal cruelty and wildlife crime (60%) as the most important issue for the RSPCA to address, followed by rescuing, rehabilitating and releasing wild animals and rehoming animals in our care (35%) and influencing government to strengthen animal welfare laws (also 35%). Wildlife crime is an area where the RSPCA plays a key role, working to investigate offences, rescue and protect wildlife, and support prosecutions. Through this work, the RSPCA helps turn public concern for animals into practical action, tackling cruelty and supporting the protection of wildlife across England and Wales. From a demographic outlook, men place greater importance on protecting wildlife (32% vs 24% of women), while

women prioritise influencing the government to strengthen animal welfare laws, animal use in science, and the use of animals in entertainment and sport. Priorities also vary by age. Younger groups place greater emphasis on protecting wildlife, supporting research to improve animal welfare, and caring for pets properly. In contrast, older groups prioritise investigating animal cruelty and wildlife crime, rescuing and rehoming animals, and educating the public about animal welfare.

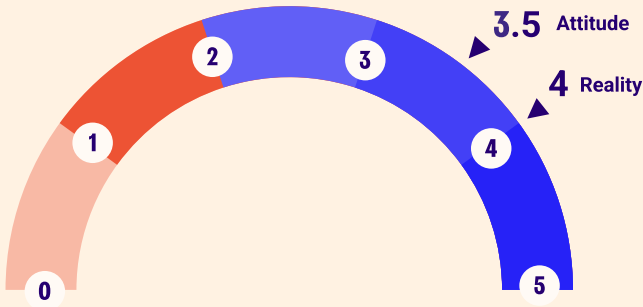
A recommendation from the Citizens' Assembly also highlights 'teaching animal welfare in schools', which we strongly support, and emphasises the public desire for this. The recommendation calls for animal welfare to be embedded in curricula from an early age, supported by age-appropriate school trips and educational resources to make learning more engaging and tangible. We welcome this recommendation and the clear public support for strengthening education in this area. Embedding animal welfare education in schools and wider learning environments remains one of our key priorities.



Reality Check

The results

Findings from the Animal Kindness Index show an attitude score of 3.5 out of 5 for this goal, unchanged from 2025. In contrast, our analysis of real-life data scores higher at 4 out of 5 and has improved over the past year, an encouraging indication that positive behaviours may be strengthening even where attitudes have yet to shift, and supporting the establishment of supportive role models.



What we found out

Public demand for stronger government action on animal welfare is clear. Around 69% of people believe the government is responsible for animal welfare, 13% have taken part in a campaign to improve animal welfare in the past 12 months, and 88% identify benefits to animal welfare education in schools. With 27% of people having seen animal cruelty online, both government and public figures have a vital role to play in raising awareness and setting a positive example.

Encouragingly, several key pieces of legislation and commitments were introduced in 2025, including the Animal Welfare Strategy; Renters' Rights Act; Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Act 2025; and the Welfare of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2025. However, despite this progress, mentions of animal welfare in the UK Parliament, Senedd, and Scottish Parliament fell by 10% compared to 2024, highlighting the need for sustained political focus and continued momentum¹⁵.

¹⁵For role models, our attitudes analysis looked at: the percentage of people witnessing animal cruelty online (27%); people who believe governments should have more responsibility for animal welfare (69%); those who have taken part in a campaign to improve animal welfare (13%); people who see the benefits of animal welfare being taught in schools (88%).

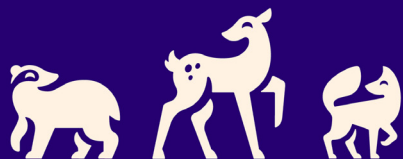
Reality-wise, we looked at: the presence of government legislation and actions around animal welfare, for all animals; the number of times 'animal welfare', 'RSPCA' and 'SSPCA' were mentioned in parliamentary sessions (including debates); the number of government petitions and debates targeted at animal welfare that were live in 2025/26.

Connected to nature

Wildlife protection at the top of the agenda

The public continues to show strong support for wildlife protection. With animal welfare being the second most important cause to the public (32%), it's not surprising that conservation and protecting the environment, as well as climate change (both 27%) are also important to them. A clear majority believe it's important for wildlife to be protected through legislation or regulation, in the countryside (96%) and in cities and towns (93%).

A clear majority believe it's important for wildlife to be protected through legislation or regulation, both in cities and towns (93%) and in the countryside (96%)



Concern for the future of wildlife also remains high, with 70% worried about wildlife in the UK and an even greater proportion concerned about wildlife globally (77%). This sits alongside a minority who are less

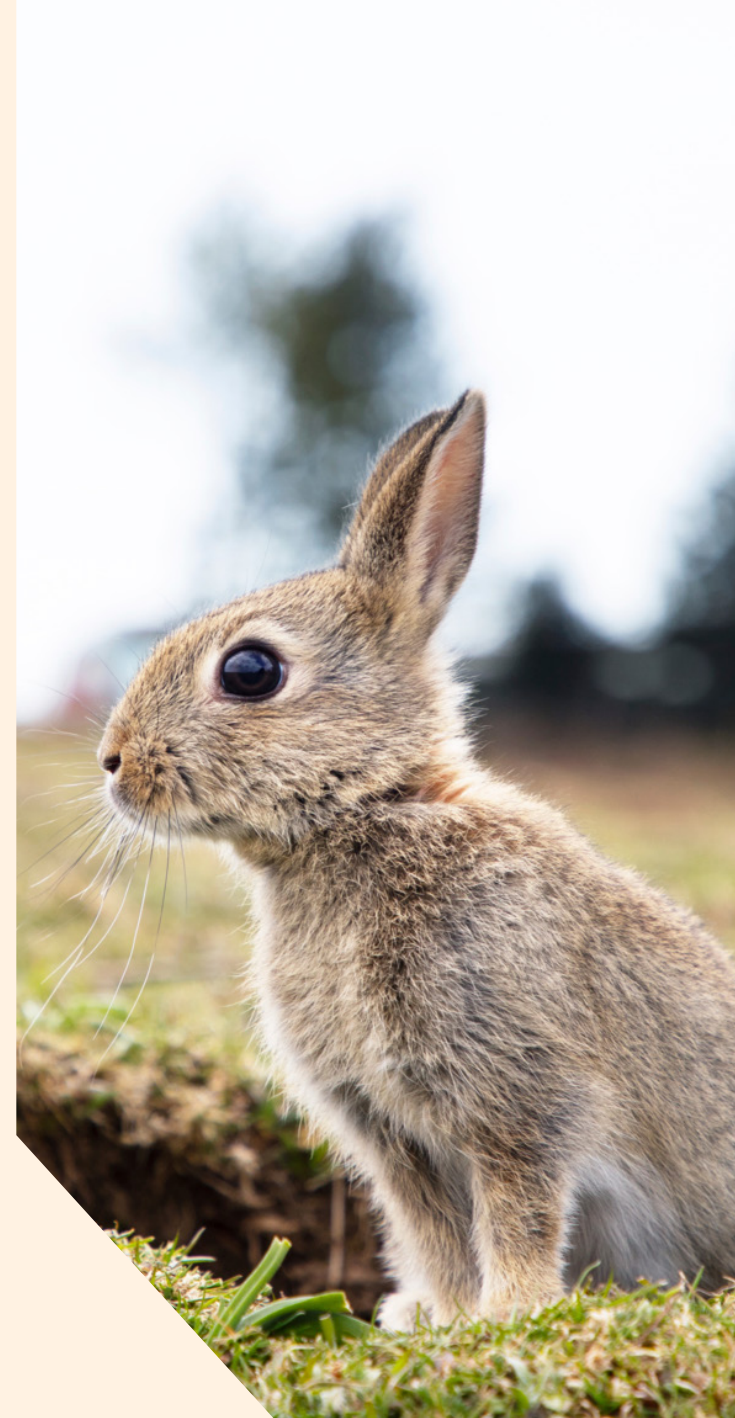
engaged with the issue overall, with 17% saying animal welfare is not a priority for them and 22% believing it's not an important issue for the country at the moment.

74%



think it's unacceptable to use snares to catch animals such as foxes and rabbits

There is strong public opposition to a range of practices involving wild animals. Around three-quarters think it's unacceptable to use snares to catch animals such as foxes and rabbits (74%) and to keep wild animals as pets (76%). This is reflective of the UK Government's Animal Welfare Strategy for England, which was published in December 2025, and includes a pledge to ban the use of snare traps to address animal cruelty as a priority action, to ensure wild animals are free from unnecessary suffering caused by the traps. Views are more mixed for other practices, with 35% considering



it unacceptable to use traps to kill animals like mice or rats, and the same proportion believing it's unacceptable to care for a sick or injured wild animal at home rather than taking them to a vet. In terms of wider priorities, improving legislation to protect wildlife ranks as the third most important animal welfare issue, cited by 31% of the public.



This year, 20% of people consider stopping the use of snares in the countryside to be one of their top three most important animal welfare issues, while 18% say the same for banning trail hunting. This aligns with findings from the RSPCA's Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Animal Welfare, which called for new and existing developments to be designed with wild animals and communities at their heart, providing wildlife corridors and waterways to connect and support habitats in local areas through nature-friendly infrastructure.

Last year, protecting wildlife was seen as the top priority for the RSPCA. In 2026, wildlife-related issues remain firmly at the top of the public agenda. Investigating animal cruelty and wildlife crime is seen by the public as the leading priority for the RSPCA to address (60%), while 39% prioritise rescuing, rehabilitating and releasing wild animals, alongside rehoming animals in our care. Across this work, the RSPCA continues to play a central role in responding to public concern by rescuing, investigating, and caring for animals affected by cruelty and neglect. However, demand for these services is rising. In 2024, our wildlife centres took in 10,195 animals, followed by 9,552 in 2025. This represents a significant increase compared with 2023, when 7,509 animals were admitted, up 36% in 2024 and 27% in 2025.

This growing public engagement is also reflected in public behaviour, with more people actively seeking advice on how to help wildlife. For example, Google searches for what to feed hedgehogs have increased by 9% compared to last year. This suggests a growing willingness to support wildlife at an individual level, but also highlights the importance

of ensuring people have access to accurate guidance so that well-intentioned actions don't unintentionally cause harm.

Wildlife in need, public in doubt

Concerningly, the proportion of the UK public reporting that they've encountered sick, injured or trapped wildlife has increased by 3%, rising to 41% (from 38% in 2025). This trend is likely being influenced by growing public awareness, as well as changing landscapes, with increasing housing developments and urban expansion leading to greater encroachment into natural habitats and people more frequently coming into contact with wildlife.

41%



of the UK public have found sick, injured or trapped wildlife

↑ 3% increase from 2025



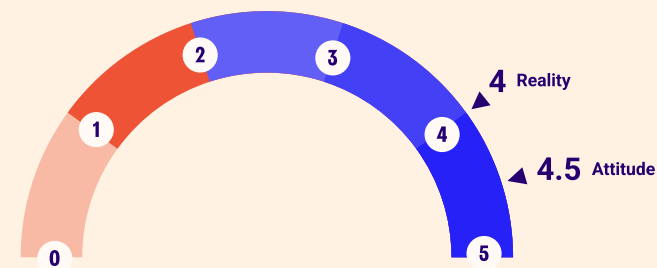


When faced with these situations, the most common response is to attempt to help or care for the animal themselves (31%). This is followed by contacting the RSPCA or another wildlife charity (both 25%) and taking the animal to a vet (23%). This highlights a clear opportunity for public upskilling, as more than one-half (55%) of people who haven't encountered sick, injured, or trapped wildlife report lacking confidence in knowing how to respond. This indicates a need for improved guidance, education, and accessible training to equip the public with the skills to act appropriately in such situations. At the same time, there's been a 12% decline in Google searches on what to do if they find an injured bird, indicating a growing gap between real-world encounters and access to trusted, timely information.

Reality Check

The results

To assess our connection to nature, we set the goal that 'actions are taken to promote animal welfare and kindness'. Results from the Animal Kindness Index survey scored this highly at 4.5 out of 5, with real-life data also showing strong performance at 4 out of 5. Together, these findings suggest that attitudes and behaviours are broadly aligned, indicating a strong and active commitment to promoting animal welfare and kindness.



What we found out

Concern for UK wildlife remains high, with 93% believing wildlife should be protected in towns and cities and 96% in the countryside. In addition, 70% of people are worried about the future of wildlife in the UK.

Encouragingly, increasing government focus, through commitments such as the UK Government's Animal Welfare Strategy, signals that wildlife is being recognised as a priority. Public action, however, presents a more mixed picture. While participation in the Great British Spring Clean has fallen by 17%, involvement in the Great British Beach Clean has risen by 11%, suggesting that while engagement may be shifting, there remains a strong appetite among the public to take action for wildlife¹⁶.

¹⁶For connected to nature, our attitudes analysis looked at: the importance of protecting wildlife through legislation and regulations in towns and cities and the countryside (an average of 95% believe this is important); public worries (70%) for the future of wildlife in the UK.

Reality-wise, we looked at: the presence of government legislation and commitments for wild-animal welfare; involvement in community litter picks.

Conclusion



The Animal Kindness Index 2026 highlights that the UK remains a nation that cares deeply about animals and their welfare. Compassion for animals is firmly embedded in national values, with a strong emotional connection, growing recognition of animal sentience, and clear expectations that animals should be better protected through education, policy and legislation.

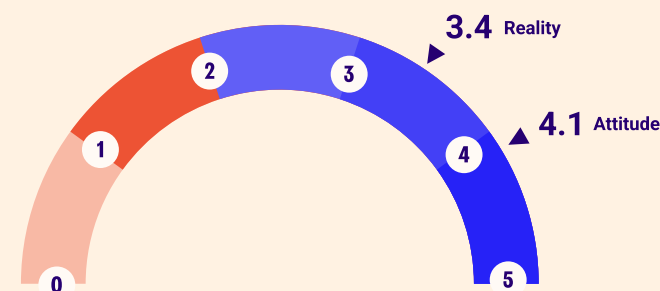
At the same time, the findings make clear that this strength of feeling is not always matched by confidence or the capacity to act. Everyday decisions around pets, consumption, wildlife encounters and information-seeking are increasingly shaped by external pressures, uncertainty, and evolving sources of advice. Cost pressures, in particular, continue to influence what people are able to do, while new

challenges such as digital misinformation and the growing use of AI are changing how people access and interpret information about animal welfare.

The 2026 Index highlights a central tension: strong and growing compassion, alongside practical and structural barriers that limit action. The opportunity is not just to increase awareness, but to enable action by making it easier for people to make informed, welfare-friendly choices and by strengthening the systems, guidance and support that sit around them. Ultimately, the path to better animal welfare lies in closing the gap between intention and impact, ensuring that public concern is consistently translated into confident, informed and meaningful action for animals.

The Animal Kindness Index: Reality Check

According to the Animal Kindness Index 2026: Reality Check metrics, the UK shows consistently strong attitudes towards animal welfare across all groups, with particularly high scores for connection to nature and companion animals. However, when these attitudes are compared with real-world behaviours, a more complex picture emerges.



Overall, attitudes remain high (average 4.1 out of 5), while real-life data scores are lower (average 3.4 out of 5), reinforcing a clear and consistent gap between what people believe and how they act. This gap is most evident among consumers and citizens, where strong concern for animal welfare isn't fully reflected in purchasing decisions, engagement, or everyday behaviours. In contrast, pet owners show the closest alignment between attitudes and actions, while areas such as role models and connection to nature show stronger real-world performance relative to attitudes.

Taken together, the findings suggest that while the UK's identity as a nation of animal lovers is clear, it's less consistently expressed in practice. The challenge moving forward is not a lack of concern, but ensuring that this concern is supported and enabled through clearer guidance, reduced barriers, and greater opportunities for people to translate their values into action.

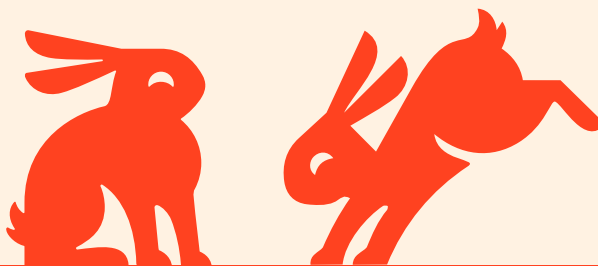
About the research

The Animal Kindness Index 2026 is the fifth in the series. The report from the RSPCA, Scottish SPCA and Ulster SPCA examines the responses of almost 7,000 people aged 7+ to understand how the UK population thinks about, feels about and acts towards animals and animal welfare.

Through an online survey, YouGov surveyed a total of 5,797 UK adults (aged 16+) between 11 and 31 March 2026, and 1,189 children (aged between 7 and 15) between 13 and 31 March 2026. The results have been weighted separately across both surveys to be representative of the UK population. Data referenced from the adults' survey is based on the responses from those aged 18+, which was a total sample size of 5,619 unless stated otherwise. When comparisons are made with previous years, it's done on the basis of respondents aged 18 and over.

In addition to the survey results, we looked at people's behaviour by analysing Google search data, and drew on resources across the RSPCA, Scottish SPCA and Ulster SPCA, to produce the Animal Kindness Index: Reality Check. The Reality Check is an additional layer of analysis that compares our findings from the Animal Kindness Index survey results ('attitudes') to 'real-life data', for example, TV programme viewing figures and the presence of government actions and legislation ('realities').

We do this through a series of indicators and scoring criteria that contribute to goals for each of our identified themes. Each criterion is scored out of a maximum of five points, and these are then averaged to create the overall goal score for both the attitudes and realities. The Reality Check measures whether the actions of individuals truly represent their intent and, if not, where we need to make improvements.





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