

# Survey To Measure The Success Of Rescue Dog Placement At A Rehoming Centre Where A Full Behavioural Service Is Offered

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## Introduction

The Blue Cross is a national animal welfare charity which rehomes over 3000 dogs a year. For the past 6 years, it has employed a full time Animal Behaviourist whose aim has been to incorporate behavioural knowledge into the rehoming procedures in an effort to attain the highest standards of welfare.

A full behavioural service is offered at the Burford Centre in Oxfordshire which operates in four main areas. These are:

- i) advice to improve behaviour of dogs kennelled at adoption centres;
- ii) assistance in matching of dogs to owners;
- ii) post-adoption advice for all rehomed Blue Cross dogs, and
- iii) advice for all problem dog owners considering giving up their pet due to unwanted behaviour.

Few dogs are ever turned away from the Centre (usually only those which are very dangerous or pose a threat to staff) and very few are euthanased for behavioural reasons. This means that dogs which have behaviour which is less than perfect are frequently rehomed. All new owners, however, are provided with as much advice and support as they need.

## Aims of the Survey

The aim of the survey was to find out how many dogs adopted from the Centre in Oxfordshire in 1995 were still in their homes one year later and whether or not new owners were happy with their chosen pet. This would allow us to find out if the policy of admitting, and subsequently rehoming, the vast majority of dogs offered to the Centre was successful. The survey was designed in such a way that it would be possible to find out if the dogs rehomed by the Centre has settled into their homes and the community one year later, or whether the system only appeared to work and that dogs actually caused significant problems in their new homes or had been passed on or euthanased. The survey also aimed to find out if the new owners had experienced behaviour problems, how severe these problems were, and if these had been successfully resolved.

## Subject Description

The survey contacted the owners of all domestic dogs rehomed from the Burford Blue Cross in 1995. Dogs ranged in age from 8 weeks to 11 years. Breeds were pure, mixed or crossed and all adult dogs were spayed or castrated.

## Experimental Method

A questionnaire was sent to the owners of every dog rehomed by The Blue Cross Centre at Burford during 1995. Those failing to return the questionnaire were followed up with a telephone call. Owners who could not be contacted were classified as 'lost to follow-up'.

## Results

From 403 dog rehoming procedures carried out at Burford Blue Cross in 1995, feedback was received from 355 (88.1%) of adopters and 48 (11.9%) were lost to follow-up. Out of the 355 adopters followed-up, there were 289 (81.4%) dogs still in their homes and 66 (18.6%) dogs no longer in their homes.

Of the dogs no longer in their homes, 29 (8.2%) were euthanased for medical conditions, died of illness or old age or were returned for non-behavioural reasons\* such as relationship splits etc. and 37 (10.4%) dogs were returned or euthanased for behavioural reasons such as dog-aggression, destructiveness when left etc. The reasons why dogs were no longer in their homes is outlined in Table 1.

	Behavioural reasons	Non-behavioural reasons
No. returned to branch	24	16
(%)	(6.8%)	(4.5%)
No. rehomed by owner	2	3
(%)	(0.5%)	(0.85%)
No. euthanased	11	3
(%)	(3.1%)	(0.85%)
No. died (%)	N/A	7
		(2.0%)
Total no.	37	29
	(10.4%)	(8.2%)

TABLE 1 : Dogs no longer in their homes

The level of successful adoption was calculated by asking owners if i) the dogs had fitted well into their home ii) they ever regretted their decision to adopt the dog iii) they would make the same choice of dog again. It was found that 282 (97.6% of dogs still in homes) were rehomed successfully.

Taking into account the dogs which were successfully rehomed from a behavioural point of view until adversely affected by circumstances (i.e. those from \* above), and combining this figure with the number of owners who were happy with the dog they chose, the number of "successful" adoptions was 311 (87.6%).

There were 40 returned adoptions. This is made up of 37 dogs which were returned once and 3 dogs that were returned twice. All of these except 2 were subsequently rehomed successfully. As a consequence, the actual number of dogs rehomed in 1995 was 360. If the situation is looked at from the point of view of the dogs being given up for rehoming, only 20 of the dogs were unsuccessful (11 were euthanased + 2 still to be rehomed + 7 causing a problem in homes). Therefore, 340 (94.4%) of dogs were successfully rehomed using the Blue Cross system.

One hundred and sixty (55.4%) adopters experienced behavioural problems with their dogs within the first 6 months of adoption. This number fell to 102 (35.3%) after 6 months, the majority of which were minor problems. The incidence and severity of problems is recorded in Table 2.

It is interesting to note that out of the 5 owners still experiencing severe problems after 6 months, none actually regretted taking on the dog.

Severity of problem according to owner	None	Minor	Medium	Severe
No. with problems up to 6 months (%)	129 (44.6%)	75 (25.9%)	66 (22.9%)	19 (6.6%)
No. with problems after 6 months (%)	187 (64.7%)	86 (29.8%)	11 (3.8%)	5 (1.7%)

TABLE 2 : Incidence and severity of behavioural problems of dogs still in their homes

### Discussion and Conclusions

The welfare implications from this survey are far-reaching and suggest that only a relatively small percentage of rescue dogs need to be euthanased for behavioural reasons.

Rescue centres have a number of choices, dependant on the size of the system, the demand for kennel space, the availability of new homes, staff time and funding. Their intake of dogs could be so selective as to ensure that all dogs could be rehomed with ease i.e. problem dogs would be refused. Alternatively, they could choose to rehome all dogs and pass all responsibility onto the new owner. Rescue kennels could even adopt the policy of keeping problem dogs indefinitely, or they could choose to take in all dogs and euthanase problem animals on a large scale.

However, The Blue Cross has been able to implement a policy which seems to offer both rescue dogs and owners the best possible chance. The behavioural service serves to maximise the rehoming success of its rescue dogs. Potentially difficult dogs are rehomed into the community, but this is done with the full knowledge of the potential owner who decides to take them on. With behavioural support, the majority of these animals can make good pets, including those which have been aggressive in the past. A good working knowledge of dog behaviour enables staff to judge which are likely to be too dangerous to go into the community and which may be rehomed successfully. Potential owners are told about any problems as soon as they express an interest in that dog, and receive advice and support for as long as they need it.

The results from this survey suggest that even though many owners may experience some type of behaviour problem with their dog, the majority (87.6%) are happy with their chosen pet one year after adoption. Many owners commented favourably on the behavioural advice they were given before and after they adopted their dog. From the point of view of the dogs being taken into care, as many as possible were accepted and placed, and 94.4% of those adopted found their way into an appropriate home.