Not Just for Lockdown

Image: Unsplash.

UK animal welfare charities express concern over adoption during COVID-19

By ZOE BELL

At five months old, Maple the Mastiff-mix has spent almost half her life in lockdown. Her owner, Mollie Millington, brought her home from the London rescue centre All Dogs Matter in mid-March, just a week before the UK's social distancing measures began.

As avid travellers, Millington and her husband, James, had never found the right time to adopt a puppy. For them, the lockdown presented a chance to stay home and dedicate themselves to raising a pet. "We haven't slept since we got her, but other than that it's been great," says Millington.

Interest in pet adoption has spiked in the past few months, as people seek companionship, affection, and a source of distraction from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Google searches for "adopt a puppy" rose by 133 per cent during the first month of the lockdown. But experts see long-term consequences to bringing home a "pandemic puppy."

Dogs Trust, the UK's largest dog welfare charity, has even tweaked its famous Christmas-time slogan to remind people that "a dog is for life, not just for lockdown."

Valerie Hosegood, owner of Newark-based Halfway Homes Dog Rescue, has received an influx of inquiries about adoption and fostering during lockdown, but she worries about potential adopters' motives. She carefully evaluates each applicant before allowing them to adopt.

"We want to know: are they just off work? What are they going to do when they go back to work?" Hosegood says. "[The dogs] will not be adopted out with anyone we feel are only wanting a dog due to lockdown."

The Millingtons have already arranged for a dog walker to take care of Maple when the couple resumes working and travelling. But assistance from dog walkers and sitters adds to the already high cost of raising a dog: according to UK veterinary charity People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA) it costs between £4,500 to £13,000 to look after a dog over its lifetime, without including additional costs due to health problems.

With rising unemployment rates and the economic impact of the pandemic, shelters worry that new dogs may be abandoned or returned post-lockdown. Animal behaviourists also wonder how social distancing will impact young dogs' development.

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been attending online dog training courses. She says Maple's training is going well, but the dog is already having a tough time being left alone. Millington worries that Maple will struggle after the couple returns to their full-time jobs.

Karen Wild, a certificated clinical animal behaviourist and author of Being a Dog: the world from your dog's point of view, says socialisation is a major concern, since dogs are not mixing with people and animals outside their households.

"I do think we'll see a generation of 'COVID puppies' that we will perhaps have to give extra consideration to," Wild says.

Wild also notes that separation anxiety will be an issue following the return to "normal." She encourages owners to maintain a sustainable routine throughout lockdown. "It would be very wise not to let the dog sit on your knee all day, even though it might make you feel better," Wild says. "Do think about the future."

Spending time with animals has numerous benefits: studies show dogs can help people reduce stress and lower blood pressure. And according to Millington, Maple is a great distraction during these uncertain times. "She's cuddly, that's nice," says Millington. "We've met a lot of neighbours on walks, too."

Because of these benefits, it is unsurprising people are eager to adopt during lockdown, Wild notes. Still, she worries that people want pets for the wrong reasons.

"I've noticed people have got a puppy because they want the comfort, they want the validation," says Wild. But adopting an animal is a huge responsibility, she explains. During lockdown or not, pet owners must be in it for the long-haul.

Maple was adopted from London rescue centre All Dogs Matter just one week before London's lockdown began on 23 March.