

Best of friends

Almost half of all households in the UK have pets. Yet landlords are notoriously not keen on tenants who want accommodation to share with their best friends – pets whom they generally see as part of the family and with whom there may be an emotional attachment going back years.

According to the Pet Food Manufacturers' Association's latest Pet Population report, last year an estimated 13 million, or 45% of UK households, had pets. The pet population had increased by almost four million to nearly 71m in just one year.

Granted, a lot of those pets are fish – an estimated 9% of households keep fish in tanks. Take away the fish, and there are still 24.5m pets in the UK.

The most popular are dogs and cats – 8.5m of each in the UK. But there are also plenty of rabbits (a million), caged birds (another million), and hamsters and guinea pigs (yet another million).

In a minority – thankfully, some might think – but nevertheless popular, are lizards (400,000 of them kept as pets), tortoises, turtles, frogs, toads, newts, and tame rats.

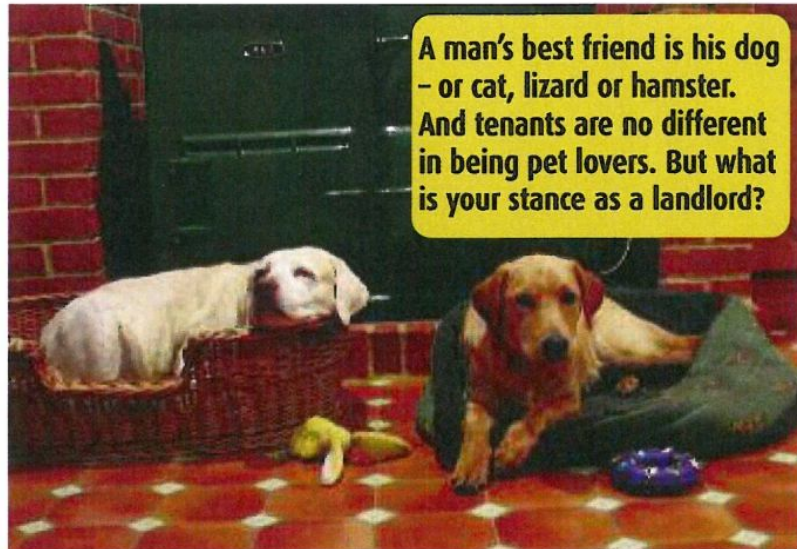
The problem for a landlord is simple: should you allow pets at all? If you have a choice between a prospective tenant with no pets and one with, which would you go for?

A recent survey carried out by the online self-service lettings business Upad shows that just 20% of tenants have pets – far smaller than the Pet Population statistic – and that in some cities a quarter of landlords advertise property as 'no pets'.

Such a mismatch means that inevitably there is a proportion of tenants with pets who find it difficult to get accommodation – so difficult that pet charity Dogs Trust estimates that around 8% of dog-owning tenants have to part with their pet.

James Davis, founder of Upad and himself a landlord, says that three-quarters of tenants with pets find it either difficult or very difficult to get accommodation, with a further 19% finding it impossible.

Pets clearly put their owners at a disadvantage when they are trying to find a home to rent.



A man's best friend is his dog – or cat, lizard or hamster. And tenants are no different in being pet lovers. But what is your stance as a landlord?

But should that be the case when many landlords must themselves own cats or dogs? However, as many landlords know, there are pets – and pets.

In one recent horror story, a couple who had rented out their own previous home to tenants who they knew had dogs were horrified to find that the number of (large) animals on the premises had spiralled, that the dogs themselves were kept in appalling conditions, and that many rooms in the property were both fouled and wrecked. Fearful neighbours had also complained.

For every one such occurrence, there must be many more heartbreaking cases where people have had to part with their adored, well-behaved and perhaps elderly animals because they cannot find rental accommodation which takes pets.

Landlord protection

So, what is a landlord to do? According to Lynsey Alston, outreach projects development co-ordinator of Dogs Trust, the answer is to start with a clear, written understanding.

She says: "We strongly recommend that landlords advertise their properties as 'pets considered' and make each decision on a case by case basis.

"Landlords should then include a clause

in their standard tenancy agreement if they have given permission for a pet. This protects both the landlord and the tenant. The clause should be as specific as possible on the pet type, size, breed, etc.

"We also recommend including a pet policy as an additional document and that this should state that if the tenant would like to get any further pets, they should seek permission in writing from the landlord first."

Landlords who let their properties through agents may find that tenants with pets are charged extra – for example, in higher admin fees, or for 'pet licences'. In Scotland, where it is illegal to charge tenants fees, such practice is banned, and Dogs Trust does not like the practice south of the border: "We do not believe that pet owners should be penalised," says Alston.

However, she adds: "Landlords could ask for a larger deposit or ask for the property to be professionally cleaned when they move out. From our experience, most responsible pet owners are happy to do this."

The charity also runs a Lets with Pets scheme that pet-friendly letting agencies can join.

Agents, who must be members of a trade body (for example, the Association of Residential Letting Agents), benefit from

LETS WITH PETS

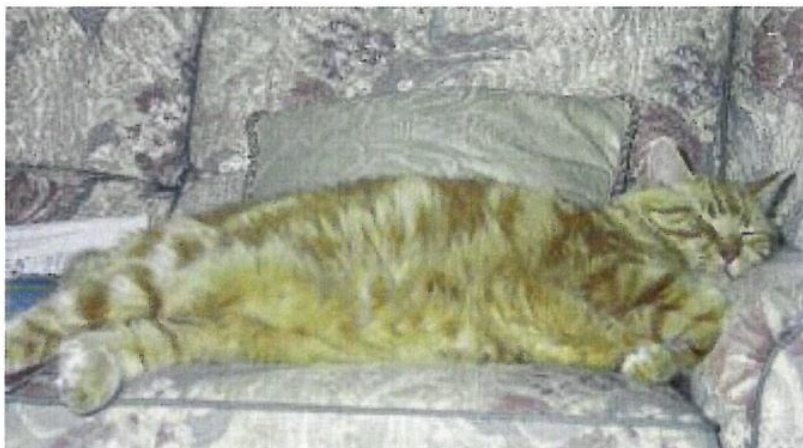
free advertising on the Dogs' Trust website (<http://www.letswithpets.org.uk/find-a-pet-friendly-letting-agency/search>).

There are currently 335 agencies signed up, with a large national chain apparently poised to sign up all its branches shortly. One lettings business already signed up is Belvoir in Bedford, run by Zoe Bywater who is herself a landlord of four properties and proud owner of three Labradors.

Risk awareness

She says that her business tries to encourage all its landlords to accept pets: "Since working with the Dogs Trust, this has been easier as we explain the process involved and the steps we take to ensure the well-being of the animal and also how to safeguard the property.

"Unfortunately some leasehold properties have a 'no pets' policy, so there is nothing we can do about that. Most landlords are open to being pet-friendly, and as we



are all animal lovers we can be very persuasive! As long as you are aware of the risk and take steps to minimise it, then there is not a problem."

All pets, as Dogs Trust recommends, are assessed on a case by case basis by Bywater and her staff: as she points out, a tenant

with several large dogs may be perfectly acceptable in a house with a garden, but not in a small third-floor flat. The majority of pets are cats and dogs, but one tenant with a tarantula was allowed to take their unusual pet to live with them.

Bywater says: "We always ask tenants for a pet reference from their previous landlord and from their vet. We always ask them to provide a pet CV too.

"We find this a very effective way of ensuring that tenants are responsible pet owners who will be considerate of the property they are renting.

"We make sure that all of our clients with a pet sign a Dogs Trust Approved Pet Policy, and we either take an additional £50 deposit per pet or ensure that the tenant provides a receipt for the cleaning of the property at the end of the tenancy.

"We have never had to evict anyone because of a problem pet, although sometimes neighbours complain. However, in our experience there is usually more going on, and the pet is simply being used as an excuse. In these situations we investigate thoroughly and sometimes enlist the local dog warden.

"On every occasion, though, we have found the complaints to have been unjustified."

Does she feel that landlords can miss out on income by refusing pets?

"Yes. We have had landlords in the past who have lost several months' rent as a result of rejecting tenants with pets.

"There can be definite benefits: because it is harder for tenants to find accommodation, not only do they stay longer but they can often be better tenants, going the extra mile to ensure they can continue their tenancy."

ACCEPTING PETS

If you are considering accepting pets in your property, there are some steps you can take to ensure the tenancy runs as smoothly as possible.

Step 1: Speak to any prospective tenants about their pet before you decide whether to accept it. Every pet is different and you should make your decision on a case by case basis. You should consider asking your tenants:

- What type of pets they own and how many?
- How long have they had their pets for?
- Are they able to provide a reference for their pet from a previous landlord?
- Are their pets regularly vaccinated and treated for fleas and worms?
- Is there someone who can care for their pet in case of an emergency?
- For dog owners, could you meet their pet before you make your decision?

Step 2: Ask prospective tenants to supply you with a written reference for their pet from a previous landlord whenever possible. Ask for the reference to cover the following points:

- Does the referee consider the tenant to be a responsible pet owner?
- Were the tenant's pets well behaved in their previous property?
- Did their pets cause any damage to the property?
- Did their pets cause a nuisance to neighbours or visitors?

Step 3: If you own a leasehold property, check that your lease does allow pets in the property. Some head leases restrict or ban the keeping of pets.

Step 4: Once you have given permission for a tenant to keep a pet in your property, include a pet clause in your standard tenancy agreement that refers specifically to the keeping of pets. Make sure you specify which pets you have given permission for.

Step 5: It is advisable to include a comprehensive pet policy in your tenancy agreement which sets out the rules for keeping pets in your property.

Step 6: If you are concerned about pets causing damage, ask for a higher deposit or ask for the tenant to professionally clean the property when they move out.

Step 7: Ask pet-owning tenants to provide you with as much information as possible about their pet before they move in, including details of someone who can care for the pet in case of an emergency.

www.letswithpets.org.uk