

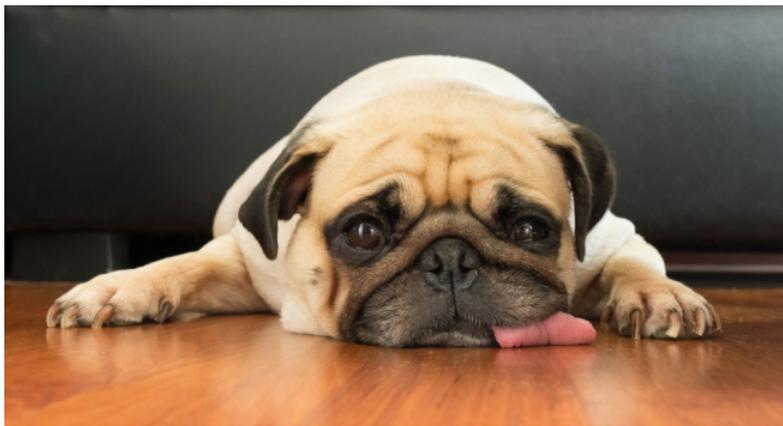


SPECIAL FEATURES

Lets with pets are the homes of the future



WARREN LEWIS | 20TH APRIL 2018



Rental accommodation, and the profile of those who live in it, is undergoing a fundamental change in the UK. Once shunned by private landlords, pets are increasingly being welcomed into rental homes, with contemporary developments even making considerations for them as part of their design.

As such, in celebration of National Pet Month (1st April - 7th May 2018), Atlas Residential's Operations Director, Stephanie Smith looks at how creature companions are impacting the planning



and delivery of build to rent services.

Earlier this year, the Labour party made headlines when they pledged to do more to help home owners keep their pets when moving into rental accommodation. The move follows a surge in demand from residents to be allowed pets in their rental homes.

Build to rent owners and operators like Atlas Residential understand that the increase in demand for pet-friendly rental homes is a natural consequence of the shifting profile of renters in the UK who are looking for a more complete, long term lifestyle.

The 2016/17 English Housing Survey shows a 74% rise in the number of households that rent over the past decade. Over that period, the number of families with children who rent their home has risen from 800,000 to 1.8 million, of which 40% own pets.

Naturally, there is some overlap, and as more families rent, more pet owners will want to include their furry friends in their accommodation. However, we see as many single renters or retirees on a comparative scale, who see their pets as family, not as a luxury.

As in most countries, dogs and cats are by far the most popular pets in the UK - 24% of households own a dog while 17% own a cat, according to the Pet Food Manufacturers' Association (PFMA). Indoor fish come next at 8%.

Pets have long been loveable additions to family life, but we are now coming to understand more about their health benefits as well.

It is vital to recognise that dogs, cats and fish have all been shown to reduce stress levels in humans. Just 15-30 minutes in the presence of these cuddly creatures results in people's cortisol levels dropping and serotonin levels increasing. Studies have shown that the closer the bond with the animal, the greater the stress relief that results from its presence. Pets have also been shown by some studies to be more effective than drugs at lowering blood pressure spikes resulting from stress and tension. Indeed, a study of New York stockbrokers by medical researcher Karen Allen found that those who owned dogs and cats suffered only half the blood pressure increase of those who didn't.



There is plenty more evidence mounting up on long term and recovery benefits, as well. Heart attack survivors are eight times as more likely to still be alive a year after their heart attack if they own a dog. Meanwhile, owning a cat reduces the risk of having a heart attack by up to a third.

And, of course, pets can be an incredible buffer against loneliness, particularly for people who live on their own and those with mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression. In short, pets equal better mental and physical health, so the UK's rental accommodation providers need to welcome them with open arms!

Building design is important here. Dog owners need space for their pets to run, play and do their business, so private and communal garden areas that allow for this need to be incorporated into plans for new rental homes. Private gardens must be large, private and secure, particularly for those allowing medium and large dogs. Not many big city apartments can boast such a feature and this is one way in which the build to rent sector has an opportunity to take a different approach.

For cats, the considerations are subtler. For example, communal gardens that have catnip planted in amongst the other flora and fauna are ideal. There are service considerations too - welcome packs that include tasty treats for pets cost little to provide but show a level of care and customer service that instantly sets the development apart.

Granted, being a pet friendly site does not mean that animals within the site roam free and rampant. In fact, it is imperative to design a clear and concise policy when converting to this mindset where all residents will be comfortable.

There are many considerations to take into account- weight and breed allowances depending on the style of the site, how to register pets, and soundproofing, for instance, along with how your teams will work with residents to ensure they do not infringe on the enjoyment of the community for all residents.

When designing or amending your contracts, it must be clarified that the pet owners are responsible to control their animal, including leads (even for cats) if they are outdoor pets and do not



harm the community aspect for their non-pet owning neighbours, and also for those who may have pet allergies.

While a new build site may have an advantage on approaching this from a design perspective, existing sites can also adapt communities to find a suitable solution. As an example, in North America, where over 70% of apartment dwellers have pets, it has become quite commonplace to find communities with designated "pet parks" or "dog runs" to provide an enclosed area where pets can be released from their leads to run, which also helps address potential pet damage or unsightliness of pet mess by containing it to one area. Furthermore, it is made clear that residents may not simply drop their pet in the area and leave, and they must also tidy after their pets to reduce waste related illnesses. Granted, it is also accepted in other markets that pet ownership is a privilege and all parties need to contribute, an understanding which has been welcomed on our sites here thus far.

Given that the Pet Food Manufacturing Association estimates around 57 million pets in the UK, it's astonishing that it has taken this long for landlords to begin accommodating domestic animals.

At Atlas Residential's build to rent apartments in England, pet-owning households have increased from 3% to over 20% since the team made residents and potential residents aware of our pet friendly approach after opening our Southampton community, Bow Square, in October 2017. We see no end to this trend and are receiving more requests for pet additions every week.

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