

## **Exercise: Planning ahead for your companion animal's end-of-life**

Clearly, it is very challenging to plan ahead for the inevitable death of your beloved pet. However, by gently working through the following steps, you will be doing all you can to ensure that the close of their time is as peaceful and kind as possible. In addition, it can give you peace of mind and will help to prevent making rushed decisions which could be regretted further down the road. It will also mean you gradually adjust to the forthcoming loss and that things will be done according to your wishes.

While there is still time, gradually work through each step, liaising with your vet team where necessary to gather more information. Keep a note of any concerns or worries you have so that you can talk to your vet or vet nurse about those issues when you next visit the practice or speak to them on the phone.

Caring for a terminally ill or elderly pet invariably takes a certain amount of time, energy and money, so it is important to be realistic about what will be required and what you can guarantee. This is something to discuss with your vet team, who are there to guide you to keep your beloved companion comfortable during the time they have left. Do also listen to your own instinct about what feels right for your pet and your personal circumstances; you may decide that it is kinder to say goodbye a little sooner, rather than prolong life with palliative care at home, or you may want to do everything you can, with your vet's support, so they can live as long as possible provided that they are not suffering.

### **Step-by-step planning**

This covers:

- Giving everyone involved in the pet's care a chance to say goodbye.
- Preparing children for pet loss.
- Planning for when your small pet needs to be put to sleep.
- Whether or not to stay with your pet during euthanasia.
- Planning for when your large animal, such as an equine, needs to be put to sleep.
- Sedation prior to euthanasia.
- What to take to the appointment.
- Special requests.
- Taking care of your pet's remains.
- Getting support.

### **Giving everyone involved in the pet's care a chance to say goodbye**

Planning ahead for your pet's inevitable death means that everyone who wants to is more likely to be able to say goodbye. This may include children who are at school or students who are away at university and any family member who is working away from home. Upsetting as it is for everyone to know that their beloved pet is coming to the end of his or her life, it gives each person a chance to prepare themselves for the sad event, and it will lessen the shock if urgent euthanasia is suddenly required.

### **Preparing children for pet loss**

The loss of the family pet may be a child's first introduction to death and is therefore an opportunity to explain the concept of dying. How you do this will depend on the age of the children and how much you think they will understand, besides how bonded they are to the animal. The general guidance is to keep things simple, straightforward and honest, perhaps using analogies from nature to explain death and dying, such as in the activity booklet, 'Remembering my pet' which can be downloaded from the Environmental Animal Sanctuary and Education (EASE) website. Using the phrase, 'put to sleep' with young children is not advisable because it can engender fear about going to sleep and not waking up. Children can respond in unexpected ways, such as being quite matter-of-fact and inquisitive, or they may appear to accept the forthcoming loss initially but struggle later on, at which point you might not necessarily link their change in behaviour to the loss of their pet.

### **Planning for when your small animal is put to sleep**

There are some practical things to think about ahead of time about having a small animal, such as a cat or dog, put to sleep. Should you take your pet to the surgery or have the vet team come to your home? The following are aspects to consider.

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## Euthanasia at home

- Does your vet offer this service?
- How much will it cost (as it is usually more expensive)?
- Do you have a quiet, peaceful environment at home, either in the house or the garden, where your pet can be put to sleep?

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## Euthanasia at the surgery

- How does your pet react when taken to the surgery – are they relaxed or do they get stressed?
  - What will it cost?
  - How do you feel about taking your pet to the surgery to be put to sleep?
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### Whether or not to stay with your pet during euthanasia

There may be situations when you will not be able to stay with your pet during euthanasia, but these would be explained to you by your vet. If you can be present you may wish to consider the following pros and cons:

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#### Staying with your pet

- Do you feel you want to be with your pet as they are put to sleep?
- Do you understand what will happen and feel you can cope with it?
- Even though it may be difficult to witness, will you be glad you were there when you look back?

#### Waiting outside

- Are you worried that you will be so upset that it could distress your pet?
  - Are there young children involved and what is best for them?
  - Will you feel settled in your mind afterwards that you said your goodbye before they were put to sleep?
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### Planning for when your large animal is put to sleep

Having a large companion animal, such as an equine, put to sleep involves different practical issues which you will need to discuss with your vet team:

- Make sure you understand the different methods of euthanasia that are available and who can legally, professionally, proficiently and humanely carry out the procedure.
- Once you have decided on the method, think about whether you want to be present or if it would be better to say goodbye to your beloved animal before handing over to the professional team. (Be aware that for safety reasons it is unlikely that you will be able to hold your companion animal as they are put to sleep).
- Think of the most suitable place for your animal to be put to sleep – somewhere that is soft underfoot (such as grass or bedding), quiet and private, and out of sight from other animals or people. The chosen area will need to have easy access for the vehicle collecting your pet's remains.

### Sedation before euthanasia

If you think sedation will help your animal because they get nervous when being handled, speak to your vet in advance of the appointment about the options so that it is factored into the plan. For example, horses can be given an oral sedative about an hour before the appointment, or an intravenous injection just prior to euthanasia. Small animals can be given a small injection to calm them five or ten minutes before the vet administers the final drug which will put them to sleep.

### What items to take to the appointment

Consider what will help to keep your animal comfortable and at ease. Here are some ideas.

- A blanket and bedding which smells familiar to your pet.
- For caged pets, ensuring they have their usual bedding and familiar items around them, including food treats if they are still eating.
- A favourite soft toy.
- For small animals, a waterproof sheet to go under them and a cloth to wrap them in once they have passed away.
- For equines, perhaps a tasty treat, such as a ginger biscuit, if they have an appetite.

### **Special requests**

Think whether you would like a snippet of your pet's fur, or a loose feather from an avian companion. You might be able to do this yourself but, if not, be sure to ask your vet. It may be possible to have a paw print taken from a cat or dog – through the after-death service you are using, or sometimes the vet practice will offer this option. These can create precious little keepsakes to bring comfort in the time ahead.

### **Taking care of your pet's remains**

This is another important part of preparing for pet loss. Again, although it is difficult, planning ahead will ensure that you have time to look into the different options, including the practicalities and costs, so you can decide how you want to lay your pet to rest, for example cremation (individual or communal) or burial. This will avoid you making a snap decision which you may not feel comfortable about later on. There are different laws about burying equines, and specifically regarding the remains of farm animals, even if they were family pets.

### **Getting support**

Anyone who has loved and lost a companion animal will understand the pain of loss which is felt keenly during the time leading up to death and then afterward. It is both natural and normal to feel a whole range of emotions and anguish, and thankfully there are organizations which offer support through this difficult time. Your vet should be able to point you in the right direction to access the support you need, or you can search online. Some charities offer free one-to-one support over the phone, internet or by letter, or you could look for a counsellor who is trained in pet bereavement, for which there may be a charge.

To conclude this exercise, there may be other issues which you personally need to address as you put in place various plans to ensure your pet's end-of-life is as peaceful as possible, and that everything is done according to your wishes. It takes courage to think about these emotional issues but in time, when you look back, there will be comfort in knowing that you did your best for your beloved companion animal.