

A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping circles in various shades of orange and brown, positioned on the left side of the slide.

Contextualised care: a roadmap



The vision

All veterinary teams and pet owners are empowered to enable veterinary care that is adapted to the specific circumstances of each animal, its owner and the broader context.

This leads to enhanced animal health and welfare, and improved wellbeing for pet owners and veterinary teams.

About this roadmap

This roadmap lays out the support that is needed to empower all veterinary teams to deliver contextualised care.

It sets out the steps that can be taken by a wide range of people and organisations — including veterinary practices, veterinary associations, veterinary educators, regulators, charities and others — to support all veterinary teams to deliver care that is adapted to the circumstances of each animal, its owner and the wider context.

The roadmap draws on insights from more than 1,000 vet team members and pet owners, and has been developed with input from 70 sector leaders and pet owners.

For more on the research and engagement that informed this roadmap, see rcvsknowledge.org/cc-report

We hope that this roadmap will help all those with a stake in the delivery of high-quality, accessible veterinary care and good animal welfare outcomes to play their part in supporting contextualised care. At RCVS Knowledge, we are committed to working with and supporting everyone from across the sector, and animal owners, to help make this happen.



What is contextualised care?

Contextualised care is a way of delivering veterinary care that is adapted to the needs and circumstances of the individual animal, its owner and the wider context. This requires a partnership between caregivers/owners and the veterinary team, all working together for the best quality of life for the animal patient.



Contextualised care to me is delivering veterinary medicine that takes into consideration all aspects of the client's needs, the owner's needs, things like finances but also things like how tolerant the patient is to daily medications, whether they travel well, how able the owner is to administer medications."

Veterinary surgeon (interview)

Taking a contextualised approach to veterinary care means considering a range of factors around the patient, as shown on the following page.

Animal

Age, breed, sex, temperament,
comorbidities, role and
relationship between animal
and owner

Owner/carer

Preferences, available
resources (including
finances), support

Consultation

Type (emergency, urgent,
routine, preventative)

Location (surgery,
owner's home, online)

Veterinary team
(knowledge, skills, values,
workload, support)

Practice

Type (first opinion,
referral, charity)

Facilities, staffing,
equipment, goals

Profession/ industry

Regulation, ethics
and protocols

Evidence base
Medicine availability

Scientific advances in
medicines and equipment

Wider society

Legislation (animal
welfare, health and
safety, employment and
business law)

One Health of people,
animals and ecosystems

Public health (zoonotic
diseases, dog bites)

Sustainability

Environmental impact
Responsible use of
antimicrobials

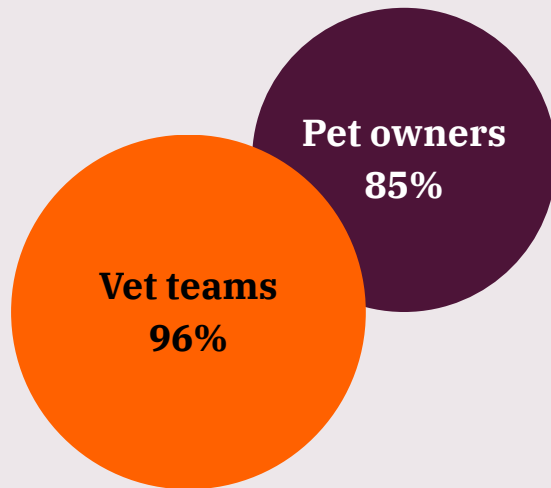
Financial sustainability
of the practice and the
sector

Workforce recruitment
and retention

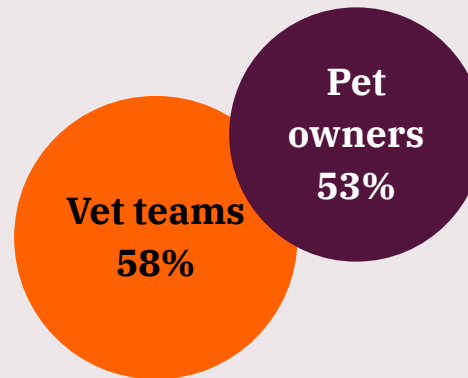
The benefits of contextualised care

There is strong agreement from both pet owners and veterinary professionals that applying a contextualised care approach can bring benefits for animals, pet owners and veterinary teams:

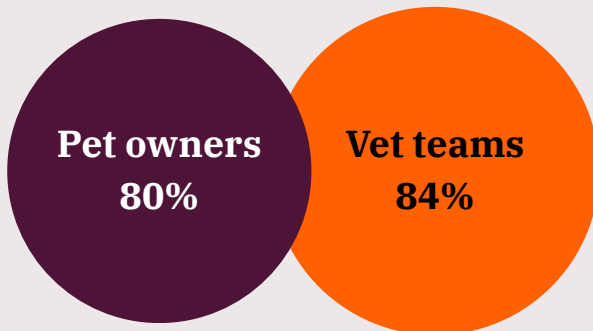
Improve trust between pet owners and vet teams



Reduce rehoming of pets



Improve the quality of care



Additional benefits anticipated by veterinary teams:

- Foster openness and support within the team (69%)
- Enable the practice to operate sustainably (60%)
- Improve job satisfaction and reduce burnout (54%).

Where are we now?

Our research suggests that, in many cases, contextualised care is already being delivered, with 45% of veterinary professionals and pet owners reporting that they face very few barriers in providing, or receiving, contextualised care. Some veterinary professionals considered it to be the way that veterinary care has always been practised over the years.



Contextualised care shouldn't be considered as something new. It's what we should have been doing all along, unfortunately we lost our way."

RVN (survey)

However, while a contextualised approach to care is not new, most veterinary professionals and pet owners currently report experiencing barriers to contextualised care.

Through our research with veterinary teams and pet owners, we explored the barriers to, and facilitators of, contextualised care. These insights shone a light on the support needed to enable all veterinary teams and pet owners to achieve contextualised care. The findings have helped inform the roadmap that is laid out here.



**What
support is
needed**

More support is needed to enable all veterinary teams and pet owners to achieve veterinary care that is adapted to the needs of each animal, its owner and the wider context. A wide range of individuals and organisation have important parts to play in making this happen.

Veterinary associations and leaders can visibly endorse contextualised care as the accepted way to deliver veterinary care. Veterinary team members can champion contextualised care and support colleagues who are facing barriers. Pet owners can seek out evidence-based information and support to ready themselves for the decisions involved around their pet's healthcare. Everyone in the veterinary community can reflect on what they are doing to enable contextualised care, what they are doing that might inadvertently be hindering it, and how they could both support and learn from others.

There are five broad areas where visible, explicit support for contextualised care could make a difference:



Professional leadership



Evidence and research



Veterinary education



Pet owner empowerment



Practice support

Professional leadership

A culture of contextualised care should be fostered across the veterinary sector, recognising it as the most appropriate way to deliver veterinary care.

What needs to happen:

- Debunk the notion of ‘gold standard’ in veterinary care.
- Ensure veterinary professionals are clear that making warranted adjustments to diagnosis and treatment routes based on the individual patient and client circumstances will not result in disciplinary action.
- Promote and celebrate examples of good contextualised care.



What needs to happen	Example actions	Who could take this forward	Timeframe	What success would look like
Debunk the notion of ‘gold standard’ in veterinary care.	Clearly and kindly call out the use of the term ‘gold standard’. Explain why this is important.	All	Ongoing	The idea of a single best way to diagnose or treat a disease is replaced by an understanding of the need to adapt care to individual circumstances and context.
	Publish clear messaging about the importance of contextualised care.	Veterinary associations, veterinary publishers and communicators	Short term	
	Ensure publishing guidelines and writers’ support tools explain how this term should and should not be used.	Veterinary associations, veterinary publishers and communicators	Short term	
Ensure veterinary professionals are clear that making warranted adjustments to diagnosis and treatment routes based on the individual patient and client circumstances will not result in disciplinary action.	Run a campaign to increase awareness that contextualised care is required by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) as set out in the guidance to the Codes of Professional Conduct.	RCVS, with support from veterinary associations and leaders	Short term	Veterinary professionals report that they are clear that practising contextualised care appropriately is not a reason for disciplinary action.
Promote and celebrate examples of good contextualised care.	Share examples of contextualised care in practice. This could include stories from the perspective of both vet teams and animal owners, and discussions about how specific cases of clinical care have been adapted to a particular context.	Veterinary associations, veterinary publishers and communicators	Medium term	Teams know what good contextualised care looks like.
	Create contextualised care awards to celebrate good contextualised care.	RCVS Knowledge	Medium term	

Veterinary education

The knowledge and skills needed to practise contextualised care should be more explicitly embedded in education and training for all team members, in both academic and workplace-based learning environments.

What needs to happen:

- Ensure that a spectrum of evidence-based options is explicitly included, together with teaching on how diagnostic and treatment pathways can be adapted to individual circumstances.
- Embed people and communication skills as a key component into all training.
- Teach vet and vet nurse students how to apply knowledge in a contextualised way and make decisions under conditions of uncertainty.



What needs to happen	Example actions	Who could take this forward	Timeframe	What success would look like
Ensure that a spectrum of evidence-based options is explicitly included, together with teaching on how diagnostic and treatment pathways can be adapted to individual circumstances.	Critically review curricula and continuing professional development (CPD) content to ensure teaching explicitly includes a spectrum of evidence-based options and how diagnostic and treatment pathways can be adapted to individual circumstances. Review the impact of the ‘hidden curriculum’.	Veterinary educators, CPD providers	Medium term	Learners report that their education emphasised the spectrum of evidence-based diagnostic and treatment options and supported them to deliver contextualised care.
	Ensure there is explicit reference to contextualised care in day one competences.	RCVS	Medium term	
	Ensure VetGDP has an explicit emphasis on a contextualised approach and communication skills.			
Embed people and communication skills as a key component into all training.	Review curricula and CPD to ensure that learners are equipped on subjects such as quality of life, managing emotions, discussing risk and talking about money and value.	Veterinary educators, CPD providers	Medium term	Learners report that their education included a focus on people and communication skills.
	Review day one competences to ensure there is more explicit emphasis on the people skills enabling contextualised practice.	RCVS	Medium term	Veterinary team members report that people and communication skills are valued and embedded in clinical CPD.
Teach vet and vet nurse students to apply knowledge in a contextualised way and to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty.	Critically review curricula to ensure they are sufficiently covering how to apply evidence in a contextualised way and make decisions amid uncertainty.	Veterinary educators	Medium term	Newly qualified vets and RVNs report that their education included how to apply knowledge in a contextualised way and to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty.

Practice support

Active steps should be taken to ensure that veterinary practices have the systems, support and team culture in place to enable contextualised care.

What needs to happen:

- Foster a team-based approach to contextualised care, creating a culture of psychological safety for pet owners and team members to have open discussions.
- Implement systems that encourage continuity of care.
- Critically review practice systems and processes to ensure that they do not restrict the delivery of contextualised care.



What needs to happen	Example actions	Who could take this forward	Timeframe	What success would look like
Foster a team-based approach to contextualised care, creating a culture of psychological safety for pet owners and team members to have open discussions.	Take deliberate steps to develop a culture of learning rather than blame, involving all team members (including the pet owner).	Veterinary practices and teams	Ongoing	Pet owners and veterinary team report enhanced safety culture and team working. Students and team members report that they are able to work together to achieve continuity of care and contextualised care.
	Provide support and mentorship on contextualised care to students, recent graduates and other team members.			
	Facilitate team-based reflection, training, and shared learning to clarify roles and strengthen collaboration.			
	Create safe systems for pet owner feedback and advocacy, such as through pre- and post- consultation information collection.	Veterinary practices and teams	Medium term	
Implement systems that encourage continuity of care.	Use technology to improve information flow between team members to ensure that key contextual details are captured.	Veterinary practices	Medium term	Teams and pet owners report that systems are facilitating continuity of care.
	Develop guidance on how to record and use contextual information about the owner that is compliant with data protection regulations.	RCVS, veterinary practices	Short term	
	Implement scheduling systems that enable booking with the same member of the veterinary team, where possible/appropriate.	Veterinary practices	Medium term	
Critically review practice systems and processes to ensure that they do not restrict the delivery of contextualised care.	Review measurement frameworks, policies and protocols that could directly or inadvertently impact contextualised care.	Veterinary practices and teams	Short term	Decrease in reports from veterinary teams that practice systems and processes restrict appropriate clinical decision-making.
	Ensure that the difference between guidelines, protocols and checklists are clear to all team members.			

Evidence and research

Better data and research on outcomes for treatment pathways should be developed to support veterinary teams and pet owners to make informed decisions about care.

What needs to happen:

- Promote widescale engagement in generating evidence on the outcomes for different treatment options.
- Develop evidence-based tools to support shared decision-making between the veterinary team and pet owner.
- Prioritise primary research that compares diagnostic and treatment options that are most relevant to the needs of individual animals, their owners, and their circumstances.



What needs to happen	Example actions	Who could take this forward	Timeframe	What success would look like
Promote widescale engagement in generating evidence on the outcomes for different treatment options.	Support veterinary teams and pet owners to actively contribute to practice-based research, and to national audits and registries that develop the evidence base for the outcomes of different treatment pathways.	RCVS Knowledge, veterinary associations, veterinary leaders, veterinary groups and practices	Ongoing	Increase in use of national audits and registries, and increased participation in practice-based research. Veterinary teams report that they are better equipped with information to support contextualised care. Pet owners feel that they have enough information on different options to make informed decisions.
Develop evidence-based tools to support shared decision-making between the veterinary team and pet owner.	Create tools that explicitly compare the impact of different diagnostic and treatment options, and that consider the different contextualised factors and impact on the animal’s quality of life and burden on the client (for example, value matrices).	RCVS Knowledge and funders, with promotion by veterinary practices and leaders	Medium term	Widespread use of resources by vet teams and pet owners with evidence that this is supporting shared decision-making in practice.
Prioritise primary research that compares diagnostic and treatment options that are most relevant to the needs of individual animals, their owners, and their circumstances.	Develop structures that facilitate stakeholders (including animal owners, practitioners, researchers, funding bodies and insurers) to collaboratively identify areas of research that are most relevant to clinical practice within the veterinary sector.	Funders, researchers, veterinary publishers, RCVS Knowledge	Long term	Increase in practice-based research and in practice—research institution collaborations on issues relevant to supporting pet owner decisions about care.

Pet owner empowerment

Pet owners should be empowered with independent, trusted information and resources to support them to make informed, guilt-free decisions about their animal's care.

What needs to happen:

- Provide greater transparency on the costs and value of veterinary care for pet owners.
- Empower pet owners to feel confident and guilt free in selecting the options that are right for them and their pet.
- Develop evidence-based, online resources to support pet owners and veterinary teams to make decisions about diagnostic and treatment options.
- Provide support and encouragement for conversations about quality of life and care-giver burden as part of the vet consultation.



What needs to happen	Example actions	Who could take this forward	Timeframe	What success would look like
Provide greater transparency on the costs and value of veterinary care for pet owners.	Ensure that pricing of treatment and diagnosis options is transparent and, where possible, information is given about the likely outcome. Provide written information after the consultation when appropriate, to help owners reflect and make decisions post-consult.	Veterinary teams and practices	Short term	Pet owners report that the costs of veterinary care are transparent, and that they understand the value of different options.
Empower pet owners to feel confident and guilt free in selecting the options that are right for them and their pet.	Run a campaign to empower pet owners to make confident, guilt-free decisions about their pet's care, covering topics such as animal welfare, quality of life, euthanasia and how to cover the costs of veterinary care.	Animal charities, breeders, RCVS, RCVS Knowledge	Medium term	Pet owners have increased confidence in making choices about their pet's care.
Develop evidence-based, online resources to support pet owners and veterinary teams to make decisions about diagnostic and treatment options.	Create online, freely accessible resources that clearly present different options for diagnosis or treatment of the most common presenting conditions, being explicit about the outcomes that are most relevant to pet owners.	RCVS Knowledge and funders, with promotion by veterinary practices and leaders	Medium term	Widespread use of resources by veterinary teams and pet owners, with evidence that this is supporting shared decision-making in practice.
Provide support and encouragement for conversations about quality of life and caregiver burden as part of the vet consultation.	Secure resources and protected time for veterinary team members to undertake CPD in these areas. Practices might consider structured ways, such as quality-of-life assessment tools, to support conversations about treatment options.	Veterinary teams, veterinary practices, veterinary groups, veterinary associations	Short term	Pet owners report that they are well supported through quality of life and treatment discussions. Veterinary teams report an increase in CPD being undertaken in these areas.

The future

This roadmap has been developed with tremendous support, engagement and input from a wide range of people from across the veterinary community and pet owners.

We know that, in many cases, excellent contextualised care is already being delivered. This roadmap is about galvanising the veterinary community to put in place support at all levels to ensure that veterinary teams and pet owners are empowered to achieve contextualised care.

In doing so, we hope to achieve enhanced animal health and welfare, and improved wellbeing for pet owners and veterinary teams.

At RCVS Knowledge, we're committed to working with and supporting everyone in the veterinary community, and pet owners, to help make this happen.

To see the research that informed this roadmap, go to rcvsknowledge.org/cc-report



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