Pets As Therapy

Schools Impact Report 2026

The magic of PAT visits –
how they work and why they matter



At Pets As Therapy (PAT for short), every day we see how a gentle paw, a wagging tail and a trusted volunteer can make a real difference to a child's school experience. Our PAT Dogs create calm, joyful moments that help children feel safer, more confident and ready to learn.

This report shares the powerful impact of those moments. From supporting anxious pupils settle into the school day, to helping reluctant readers to discover the joy of books, PAT visits are strengthening wellbeing, learning and belonging in schools across the UK.

I'd like to thank our volunteers and their wonderful dogs, whose time, care and commitment help bring this special kind of magic to so many children and school communities.

Steven Wibberley, Chief Executive,
Pets As Therapy



PAT visits are all about creating moments of magic. Our Read2Dogs scheme helps young people improve their literacy skills in a calm and encouraging environment.

Reading aloud to a PAT Dog – an attentive, non-judgemental listener who doesn't comment or correct – makes the experience enjoyable and stress-free. Children who were reluctant to open a book often turn into enthusiastic readers who can't wait to share a story.

PAT visits can also help to boost self-esteem, improve concentration and even support behavioural development — that's the magic of spending time in the company of a waggy-tailed friend.

"PAT visits have a valuable and wide-ranging positive impact on pupils, staff and the wellbeing of the whole school."

Teachers tell us that PAT visits support children's social and emotional wellbeing, and are sometimes the only reason why a child is happy to attend school.

PAT SCHOOL VISITS IN NUMBERS



1,834
schools currently receive a visit from a friendly PAT Team



500,000+
children interact with a PAT Pet every year

Our research

With the help of Swansea University School of Social Sciences, Pets As Therapy invited schools across the UK to provide feedback about the charity's visiting service. 317 schools responded to the survey.

The highlight of the week

Feedback from our PAT survey was very positive. When asked about PAT visits, respondents frequently used words like "happiness', "excitement" and "anticipation", often describing the visits as "the highlight of the week".

The presence of a dog is uplifting for the whole school. Children, as well as staff, look forward to the visits and the chance to spend time with a friendly dog in a calm and emotionally safe space. These visits consistently boost morale, support wellbeing and reinforce a caring, inclusive school ethos.

PAT Volunteers and their dogs are also seen as valued members of the school community. Schools repeatedly express gratitude for their time, professionalism and commitment, often emphasising the strong, lasting relationships formed between the volunteers, their dogs and the pupils. Pets As Therapy has become an invaluable, much loved and integral part of school life.

THE IMPACT OF PAT VISITS

Wellbeing

96% of the schools surveyed say visits support children dealing with stress or anxiety

96% stated visits improve the wellbeing of the whole school

Development & skills

96% of the schools surveyed reported an improvement in children's happiness

95% saw children gain confidence around dogs

94% observed improved social skills

81% noted an improvement in the joy of reading

"Alfie dog is part of the school family. He promotes caring, empathy and is always happy to see children."



WHAT HAPPENS DURING A PAT VISIT?

We asked schools to tell us how they make the most of a visit from a good-natured PAT Dog.



Unlocking confidence through reading

85% of school visits involve children reading to PAT Dogs

Teachers reported that PAT visits have a clear positive impact on reading, especially for reluctant and anxious readers. Children demonstrate greater confidence when reading aloud and their enjoyment increases. PAT Dogs are quiet listeners (they may even lie down, cuddle up and close their eyes!) and this removes pressure and fear of failure.

Our survey highlighted an increased willingness to read. One respondent commented that a pupil receiving one-to-one support was reluctant to read in school, but engaged positively when reading with the PAT Dog. This success was transferred into daily classroom practice using a toy dog that mirrored the PAT routine, significantly increasing the pupil's confidence and willingness to read independently.

"Children who refuse to read to adults are willing and eager to read to a dog!"

What activities take place?

We asked schools to tell us about how they spend time with the PAT Team.

- **85%** of school visits involve children reading to a PAT Dog
- **75%** of schools use PAT visits to support social and emotional wellbeing
- **46%** of schools do activities to help communication skills
- **28%** of schools provide support for dog phobia/anxiety
- **25%** use PAT visits as a reward/recognition for improvement in behaviour, attendance or achievement

Who spends time with a PAT Dog?

We also asked schools how they select the children who get to meet PAT Dogs – the following criteria was noted:

- **66%** of schools choose children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)
- **54%** of schools invite children who have difficulty reading
- **48%** of schools focus on adverse childhood experience/trauma
- **44%** say the criteria is behaviour related
- **28%** use PAT visits to help with attendance challenges
- **28%** mention social care intervention
- **28%** have no selection criteria
- **5%** list refugee/asylum seeking as their criteria
- **15%** other

Support for vulnerable pupils

Teachers described PAT visits as transformational for some of the most vulnerable pupils. Schools report improvements in attendance, emotional regulation and engagement for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), pupils with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs, and those with experiences of trauma histories and Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA).

One pupil with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and significant SEMH needs showed a marked reduction in emotional dysregulation through regular PAT sessions. The consistent, trusted relationship with the therapy dog and volunteer provided a safe, predictable environment that supported the pupil's emotional stability and helped them develop more effective coping strategies.

Another pupil with SEMH needs found attending school highly distressing. On PAT visit days, they met the dog at the school gate, walked with the dog around the school grounds and spent time settling before entering the classroom.



This structured transition routine helped the pupil feel calmer and enabled a more successful start to the school day.

"One child faced challenges with school refusal when peers were absent, particularly on Mondays. However, after scheduling an intervention with Margo, their attendance improved on those days."

One school also shared the experience of a pupil with Emotionally Based School Avoidance, who looked forward to PAT visits and felt accepted without judgement by the volunteer and therapy dog. Over time, the pupil grew in confidence and took on a supportive role during PAT sessions, strengthening their sense of belonging and increasing their engagement with school life.

HELPING CHILDREN FEEL CALM AND READY TO LEARN



Across many schools, emotional wellbeing emerged as the greatest benefit of PAT visits. Teachers consistently described sessions as calming, therapeutic and emotionally grounding.

Being around a PAT Dog helps to reduce anxiety, and many schools reported that children, particularly those with SEMH needs, returned to class after a PAT session settled and ready to learn.

One school revealed that a pupil with significant behavioural challenges was consistently observed to be at their calmest during PAT sessions. Another said that pet therapy was key to supporting a pupil with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). During PAT visits, the child's interaction with the dog calmed them, both emotionally and from a sensory perspective. This meant the pupil could return to class more focused.



Improving communication and interactions

Teachers consistently observed improved self-esteem and confidence following sessions with a PAT Dog. They noted that children feel valued, special and proud of their engagement with the dog, while quieter pupils often come out of their shell.

Enhanced communication and social interaction were frequently highlighted as positive impacts. In some cases, children who struggle with language or social confidence begin to speak more freely, build relationships and engage with others.

One school revealed they witnessed a communication breakthrough for a mute pupil. Over a three-month period of attending PAT sessions, the child gradually built enough confidence to begin speaking. It was a "significant milestone."

Another school noted that a pupil with speech and language targets used PAT sessions to practise sounds in an informal, enjoyable way.

"The child was highly motivated and relaxed, making meaningful progress without experiencing the pressure of formal therapy."

PAT was also credited with boosting attendance, social skills, oracy and relationships with adults. A Year 5 pupil with autism and an EHCP openly expressed a dislike of guided reading in class. In contrast, the pupil independently prepared to read with the PAT Dog. We were told:

"During these sessions they read confidently, fluently and expressively, demonstrating a level of enjoyment and pride not previously seen in the classroom."

Building trust

Strong relationships often develop between children, the dog and the volunteer. PAT Volunteers are frequently described by schools as trusted neutral adults – children feel comfortable talking to them. This trusted relationship creates opportunities for children to ask questions, express their thoughts and feelings, and engage in open, honest conversations.



One survey respondent explained how a spontaneous conversation began when children asked the volunteer about the therapy dog's family. This naturally led to a discussion about how families can look different and that this diversity is normal and something to be valued. The child-led chat promoted inclusion, empathy and understanding in a safe and supportive environment.

REDUCING FEARS AND DEVELOPING LIFE SKILLS

Schools report that regular PAT visits help children overcome a fear of dogs while building confidence that extends beyond the school environment. As pupils become familiar with the therapy dog and learn how to approach and interact with it safely, many develop skills and self-assurance that transfer into everyday life.

Several schools shared examples of children who gradually overcame a fear of dogs as a result of befriending a gentle PAT Dog. One pupil, who was initially very frightened, became more confident week by week, and eventually was able to offer the therapy dog a treat by hand.

Another school explained that a non-verbal pupil with a severe dog phobia initially observed the PAT Dog from a distance, and sometimes reacted with visible distress. As trust developed over time, the pupil chose to sit beside the dog and, when ready, initiated physical contact. Before long, the child excitedly greeted the dog's arrival at the school.

For one family, the impact extended beyond the school gates. Their child's fear of dogs had previously been so severe that it limited their ability to visit parks and other community spaces. Following regular PAT visits, the child began referring to unfamiliar dogs as "friends of the PAT Dog". Although still cautious at times, the child's anxiety no longer prevents the family from enjoying outdoor activities together.

PAT visits also support the development of wider life skills. One school described a group of pupils whose anxiety about losing their baby teeth had affected eating, drinking and oral hygiene. Through caring for the therapy dog, including feeding and brushing its teeth, the children gradually became more comfortable discussing and managing their own physical changes, helping to rebuild confidence in everyday self-care.


Paul & Orla

Meet some of our amazing PAT Teams

Paul Hallam

"Seeing an autistic child, who is in meltdown and completely overwhelmed, come and sit with Orla and within minutes is calm and cuddling her is very special."


Valerie & Rosie

Valerie Matthews-Lane

"Just 15 minutes sitting next to Rosie and stroking her can help some children to centre themselves and feel better and able to go back to class."


Helen & Dempsey

Helen Maxwell

"A child who'd had a bad experience wouldn't come to school. But when they told him Dempsey was visiting, he turned up."



Adrian & Dave

Adrian Welch

"A girl at school rarely speaks, but when she comes in to see Dave she talks non-stop!"



Susan & Django

Susan Brown

"In a busy and challenging environment, it's often the school staff who take a few minutes of their precious time to pet Django. I'm often told it makes their day."

HOW PAT WORKS IN SCHOOLS







It's easy for schools to register for a PAT visit – simply complete an online registration form.

However, before a school welcomes a visiting PAT Volunteer, some preparation is needed. Pets As Therapy asks that every school is clear about what outcomes they expect, and processes are in place to measure progress towards these outcomes.

Schools should also plan for the visits, carry out a risk assessment and consider how they communicate with the wider school community.

Once registered, the school is added to a list of establishments requesting visits and volunteer teams in the local area are notified of the school's interest. PAT then does its best to match the school with a suitable volunteer and their temperament-assessed pet.

Use this QR code to register for a PAT visit in a school

Our survey findings:

- Overall, schools found it easy to set up PAT visits, scoring this **9.2 /10**
- Most schools select children to meet PAT Dogs based on SEND or difficulty with reading. However, **28%** said no selection criteria was used.

Pre-visit checks*

- **>90%** agreed the visits at a senior level
- **>90%** completed a risk assessment
- **>90%** checked for phobias or allergies
- **86%** communicated with parents

(*schools who registered in past two years).



"I made an enquiry and was put in touch with a local volunteer who has been amazing."

Measuring the benefits

Schools use a blend of informal and formal monitoring to evaluate the impact of PAT visits, embedding tracking into existing pastoral, SEND and attainment systems, rather than creating new processes.

Qualitative and informal approaches (most common):

- Everyday observation – watching children enjoying time with the dog, capturing photos and keeping informal logs.
- Regular discussions – gathering feedback from school staff, volunteers, pupils and parents (sometimes logged in CPOMS).

Quantitative and formal approaches:

Used primarily for structured interventions tracking pupils with SEND/SEMH needs or monitoring specific EHCP targets.

- Surveys and forms – pupil questionnaires handed out at the start and end of sessions, and structured feedback collected via Microsoft Forms.
- Progress tracking – reviewing reading scores and monitoring the development of priority readers.
- Attendence tracking – noting improvements in attendance and punctuality on PAT visit days.
- Standardised frameworks – utilising tools such as Boxall Profile, Leuven Scales and Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires.



Notes

- The majority (95%) of the schools that responded to our survey were in England with 3% in Scotland, 2% in Wales and 1% in Northern Ireland.
- 72% of the responses were from state primary schools, with much smaller numbers from secondary or independent schools.
- More than half of all responses were from leaders (eg headteachers) in the schools, showing a good level of senior engagement.
- Approximately 55% of children meeting a PAT Dog had SEND.
- Around 25% of children meeting a PAT Dog received pupil premium (free school meals) – this is in line with the England national average.
- Approximately 16% of children had English as an additional language – lower than the national average of around 21%.

Fundraise for PAT

Help us create more magical moments in schools

There is a substantial ongoing cost to recruit, assess, insure and support the volunteers and pets who make school visits possible. So please consider supporting PAT through a fundraising activity or donation.

Every donation helps

£28 covers our costs to support a PAT Volunteer for a whole year, helping them bring comfort and joy while making PAT visits to schools, care homes and hospitals.

£91 helps us recruit a new volunteer and assess their pet, creating a brand-new PAT visiting team.

£730 funds training for 10 new assessors, who will ensure all PAT Pets have the right temperament for visits.

To find out more, scan here



Matilda Cottam, aged eight, and her six-year-old brother **Thom** took on an epic climbing challenge – reaching the top of Yr Wyddfa (Mount Snowdon) – and **raised £1,500 for PAT.** *"We did it because we are aiming to get a therapy dog for our school," Matilda smiles. "We know that this charity can help us with this. It would help some students come to school and feel ready to learn if they had a PAT Dog there."*



Students at the **RGS Worcester** wanted to say thank you to **PAT Dog Jasmine** for coming to see them every week, so they organised a charity bake sale and **raised £400 for Pets As Therapy**. The PAT visits have become a cherished highlight for both students and staff.



Pupils and staff at **Lochinver House School** in Potters Bar **raised £2,600** for Pets As Therapy.

Pets As Therapy

Thank you to Dr Emily Lowthian and Professor Helen Lewis at the Swansea University School of Social Sciences for their invaluable assistance in compiling this School Impact Report.

For more information

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Cathy & Pickle



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