

# Q&A

## 'SUCCESS IS ADOPTING THE PET-INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY OUTREACH APPROACH'

Gina Long catches up with Belinda "Bin" Johnston, chief executive of Our Special Friends, a West Suffolk-based organisation she founded to protect and strengthen the bond between people and their animals.

**A** veterinary surgeon by training, Bin's career has been shaped by a deep understanding of both the clinical and emotional dimensions of animal companionship, and by a lifelong commitment to compassion, dignity and care.

Through Our Special Friends, she has created a charity that quietly but profoundly supports some of the most vulnerable individuals across Suffolk, people facing isolation, illness, bereavement or major life change, helping them to remain connected to the animals who offer comfort, stability and purpose in their lives.

Her work sits at the intersection of veterinary science, emotional wellbeing and social care, and is widely respected for its professionalism, sensitivity and humanity.

Beyond her leadership role, Bin remains closely involved in frontline work, contacting those referred to the charity, assessing need and ensuring support is thoughtful, appropriate and sustainable.

Her belief is simple yet powerful: people

need pets and pets need people, however, for these relationships to thrive, they must be understood, supported and, at times, gently guided.

It is this clarity of vision, combined with warmth and integrity, that makes Bin Johnston's contribution to life in our region truly extraordinary.

**What does East Anglia mean to you?**

Beautiful scenic landscapes and warm friendly 'down to earth people', strong compassionate communities.

I love Bury St Edmunds. I feel that it has a real soul.

When I first moved here I saw several generations of the same families walking in the market and it was lovely to see, especially as our immediate family had experienced significant loss - my parents had both died by the time I was 24 years old, and my siblings lived in different countries.

**What was your first job?**

My first role after graduating from vet school was



Our Special Friends volunteer Lindsay with Ken and Lacey. Inset: Bin Johnston

in a Wimbledon and Tooting practice which had not had a female assistant before.

My boss was an excellent mentor and one of my neighbours was very confused to see me go off to work with my dog, and asked me where I could possibly be going.

My very first job as a young teenager was helping at local farm, feeding pigs, hand milking the house jersey cow and doing whatever was needed.

**What first made you truly appreciate the depth and importance of the bond between people and their animals, particularly in times of vulnerability or loss?**

It took me a long time to realise that my own dog Tasha (who I got as a puppy in my second year of university) had quietly accompanied me over the period when my father took his life, and that caring for her, walking daily out in the community, had helped me to cope; supporting me in a healthy way.

She and I together built a network of support which meant I had friends to turn too.

So many people cope in other ways, eg relying on alcohol.

I didn't realise how important Tasha's presence was and how lucky I was to not lose her over the 13 years of her life.

It is so easy to overlook just how important these relationships are; we can take them for granted.

I also witnessed as a Samaritan volunteer how lifesaving pets were as so often people were still living due to their presence.

Our Special Friends often supports people at some of the most difficult moments of their lives.

**How do you personally carry that responsibility?**

When I trained in person-centred counselling, I learnt a lot about myself and tools to help support others.

I was fortunate to meet someone who used to run a counselling service in Norfolk.

They have been regularly supervising me since I started the charity and I have added in periods of therapy as and when I have needed extra support.

I have been able to explore my own emotions and it helps to maintain my wellbeing despite



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hearing of other's suffering and distress.

I can empathise but not get traumatised by their experiences. Sometimes I understandably get very moved by what I am told, and I do what I can to manage my own wellbeing.

In the charity office we are always talking about how important it is to keep our own oxygen masks on.

**Your work brings together veterinary science, emotional wellbeing and social care. Why do you believe this joined-up approach**

**is so vital?**

Because people and animals are suffering and we cannot afford to ignore how important the human-animal bond is in supporting people and helping them to cope.

By working in a holistic way, collaborating with others, we can create transformative change to people's lives so there is a real difference rather than people going around in a vicious circle of deprivation. 'One Welfare' is where human wellbeing, animal welfare and the environment are all interconnected. If you improve one, the others benefit.

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Initial research in 2016 showed that dog and cat ownership in the UK saved the NHS £2.45 billion a year and as a society, we can't afford to ignore the evidence.

We need to do things as efficiently and effectively as possible. Suffolk and Norfolk are often described as close-knit communities, yet isolation can be hidden.

**What have you learned about loneliness through your work locally?**

That it is hidden in plain sight. That pets enable people to live happily in solitude and prevent loneliness, by providing unconditional love, a constant presence and get people out connecting with others.

However, in every community there are people and pets experiencing significant distress and vulnerability, hidden with

unmet needs. They need support and if there are not pets, but a love of animals, our regular visits with friendly dogs (and volunteer owners in tow) bring joy and smiles.

**What's your favourite place to spend time in the region?**

Cavenham/Tuddenham heath which is special at all times of the year.

I find it a very spiritual place, and particularly love the main Silver Birch wood.

One of our dog's ashes are scattered there and I often go for a recharge. There are damsel flies on the bracken and stone-curlews calling in the summer.

**What's usually playing on the radio or in your car?**

I oscillate between Times Radio, Radio 4, Radio 1 and Heart. I love

Otto, Simba and Rolo. Inset: Serena and Toffee

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would run wild. It was from an early age as a child.

I would stand on my bed and worry that if I put my foot on the ground, a hand would come out from underneath and grab my leg.

I once forced myself as a teenage to walk to the farm of the vet to see a pig giving birth.

My father refused to give me a lift and I had to walk down a very dark rural lane past a cemetery and I was terrified.

Having animals and others with me makes a complete difference!

**How do you switch off?**

I walk in nature or garden, watch a film, listen to music/birdsong and feed birds, plus enjoy the company of wonderful friends (human and animal!).

**If you weren't doing what you do now, what might you be doing instead?**

I might have been a social worker as I am very drawn to supporting people in times of difficulty.

I could have been living in Canada as my ancestors are Canadian and at one point we were going to move there.

It is a stunning country and I love the landscapes, so I would be hiking in the Rockies!

**What does success look like to you now?**

Success is influencing others to adopt the pet-inclusive community outreach approach that we have developed and to not overlook the importance of harnessing the power of animal companionship.

**Looking back, what are you most grateful for?**

For the support of my friends, family and others who have enabled me to cope and develop resilience.

For my education, energy, mobility and curiosity and my love of animals and nature, and for everyone who has made Our Special Friends possible.

**What do you feel most proud of when you look at what Our Special Friends has become?**

The compassionate community that has built up, the people that have gifted their time and the lifechanging impact our approach has made.

Looking ahead to 2026, what do you most hope Our Special Friends can continue to offer, both to people and to the animals who share their lives?

I hope that we can be sustainable, that we are able to continue and then thrive in what is a very difficult financial climate for so many sectors and individuals.

We are constantly seeing how tough it is for people being made redundant, homeless, falling on tough times and it is not a given that a good idea is able to continue if it is not funded.

[www.ourspecialfriends.org](http://www.ourspecialfriends.org)

listening to the charts and regularly catch up when I am dog walking.

I also listen to books and podcasts especially Feel Better, Live More by Dr Chatterjee.

**What's always in your fridge?**

Philadelphia cheese! I love it with marmite or chili sauce.

Mockingbird Raw Greens smoothie as I love the taste and it makes me think that I am managing to do what's right for my gut microbiome.

**Your Mastermind subject?**

Everyone assumes that I would be good in a pub quiz team but the reality is that my recall for general knowledge is embarrassing.

I can't think of anything that I could accurately provide detailed in-depth answers for!

**What's the best piece of advice you've ever been given?**

I started seeing vet practice from 11 yrs old with our local vet.

I went with him everywhere and he told me that if people were angry they probably had 'piles' (haemorrhoids) and were in pain.

It was an extraordinary thing to tell me, but it made me immediately think that anger came from someone hurting, so I was not put off, repelled and frightened, but was able to feel compassion.

**What motivates you when things feel difficult?**

My passion for what I do and my love of nature.

I have walked first thing in the morning for most of my adult life and it is such a natural thing of me to do.

I start the day feeling grounded, refreshed and usually have seen

something special, a waning full moon or a stunning dawn sky,

**What does wellbeing mean to you?**

Being physically mobile, emotionally resilient and living in harmony with others.

**What brings you the greatest sense of purpose?**

Accompanying people on difficult journeys and helping to provide solutions which empower them out of a crisis, enhancing the quality of life of both people and pets.

Influencing others to think and do things differently. Making a difference.

**What's something people might be surprised to learn about you?**

That I used to be really scared of the dark, as my imagination

BJ with Rolo