



Staffords Just Keep on Giving

Intro

We all know the feelings of wellbeing that can be enjoyed through simply spending time with your dog. For many years now various organisations have been making use of the dog-human relationship to enhance peoples' lives. Staffords are such people-oriented dogs that this line of work can be very suitable, and of course enjoyable, for them.

There are many organisations working with dogs to support people's wellbeing, for this article I have been lucky enough to write about organisations with a personal connection.

I work with children who have additional support needs and in our school we are just embarking upon a relationship with Therapets. The children are very excited to be helping me with this article!

The second organisation that we will hear about is Paws for Progress. They are a Community Interest Company who work with several dog rescue organisations, including the one I am involved with, Staffie Smiles Rescue. They are undertaking pioneering work benefiting rescue dogs, people with dementia, children in the community, and men, women and youngsters in the prison population in Scotland.

I can only skim the surface and tell you about the basics, so I would highly recommend visiting www.pawsforprogress.co.uk and <https://www.canineconcernscotland.org.uk/therapet> to find out more.

Paws for Progress



Paws for Progress are providers of the UK's first prison based rescue dog training programme, developed originally as the PhD project of Rebecca Leonardi through a collaboration between the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) and the University of Stirling. This pioneering initiative was first launched at HMP & YOI Polmont in 2011.

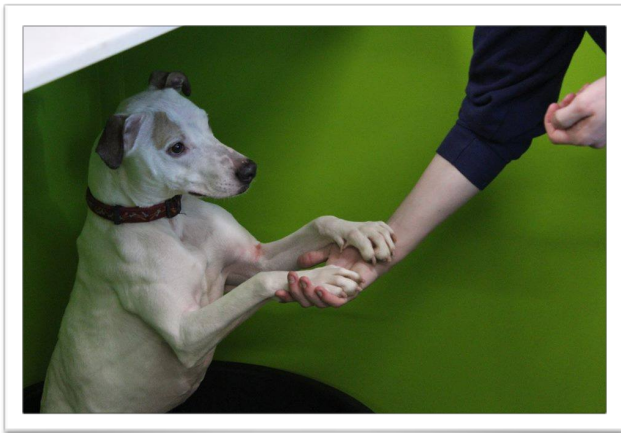
Paws for Progress became a registered Community Interest Company in February 2014 following the very successful pilot phase. Their aim is *"to enhance the well-being of people and animals by promoting and supporting, by whatever means, positive and effective interactions between them"*.



The project, which I heard about through Staffie Smiles Rescue, is based at HMP & YOI Polmont. Paws for Progress staff work with young people ages 16 – 21 to teach them about dog care, behaviour and positive reinforcement training. They continue to offer students support following their release, helping them use the skills they have learned to find work experience and employment. The young men taking part in the project are working with rescued dogs, rehabilitating them in preparation for adoption.

Paws for Progress say; “The really great thing about this project is the fact that it is hugely beneficial for both the young people AND the dogs who are involved. In addition to helping dogs to be rehomed we are also providing valuable dog care education for young people, influencing their attitude toward dog ownership in the future. This helps to improve the welfare of dogs more widely across Scotland.”

The rescue dog training programme runs in ten week cycles, with dogs often participating in multiple cycles of the course before being successfully rehomed. As well as working with the dogs, the participants learn team working and social skills, gaining up to 9 SQA qualifications through the work that they are doing with the dogs thanks to the involvement of Fife College (learning provider at HMP & YOI Polmont). Students who have completed the course successfully then have the opportunity to return as helpers and mentor the new participants.



The rescue dogs stay at local kennels and are brought into HMP & YOI Polmont three times a week for training sessions. They come from a range of small, local dog rescue charities and organisations including; Save a Staffie Scotland, Staffie Smiles Rescue, Staffordshire Rescue Scotland and Scottish Staffordshire Bull Terrier Rescue.

Each student is paired with a dog, and their work is focussed towards helping the dog be rehomed. The students design training plans using reward based methods to achieve their training goals, also taking part in theory sessions learning about dog care, training and behaviour. They are visited by visitors from a range of local organisations who work in animal training and care, who provide an insight into how the skills that the students are learning could lead to a career.



Paws for Progress staff report that *“The affection between dogs and handlers at Paws for Progress is moving to observe. The young men who are taking part are very committed to helping the dogs. The dogs in turn appear very enthusiastic about attending the training sessions, and after a morning of undivided attention and training with their handlers they return to the kennels appearing relaxed and content.”*

When a dog is successfully rehomed it is cause for great celebration for all participants, and of course mixed feelings too.

“Sad to see them go man, but it’s only for the best isn’t it? I felt happy in myself as well aye. For doing the work for them and that. Know what I mean? It does feel good, feel really proud of yourself.”

“I honestly believe that if I had been involved in Paws for Progress before coming to prison, I would not be here now.”

“When I first went into jail I never thought I would get that opportunity. It’s led to a full time job for me working with dogs and it’s all because of the dogs and getting that help when I was in the jail.”

Students, Paws at HMP & YOI Polmont.

Rebecca’s PhD level evaluation of the project showed that the dogs’ welfare and behaviour both showed improvement after participating in the programme, with almost all dogs successfully rehomed. Likewise, taking part in the project has been found to be equally beneficial for the young men taking part. Paws for Progress is successful in meeting it’s aims for students, which are to improve behaviour, increase engagement in education, improve employability and enhance well-being.

Feedback from the young men taking part is key to continuing to improve the programme, and the response is certainly very positive. The students report improvements in themselves across a range of areas including their skills and understanding of dog care, emotional management, motivation, social skills such as working with and helping others, and improved attitudes towards learning. This quote from one of the young lads sums it up nicely:

“Even apart from the qualifications and certificates we get at Paws for Progress, we get something more than that. It’s the sense of accomplishment, when you’ve taught something, even just one thing. Whether you’ve taught your dog or you’ve helped another student, you feel like you achieved a real goal. And when my dog achieves something, well then I’m really happy, because I know that dog is one step closer to getting a home.”

Due to the success of Paws for Progress at HMP & YOI Polmont, Paws now deliver Human Animal Interaction programmes for children and young people in the community across central Scotland. They work with schools and charities such as Barnardo’s Scotland and provide fun, educational activities with the dogs. They have a specially



trained team of Paws Ambassadors who enjoy meeting children and teaching them about dog behaviour and welfare. The children enjoy working with the dogs and their confidence and communication skills improve as a result.

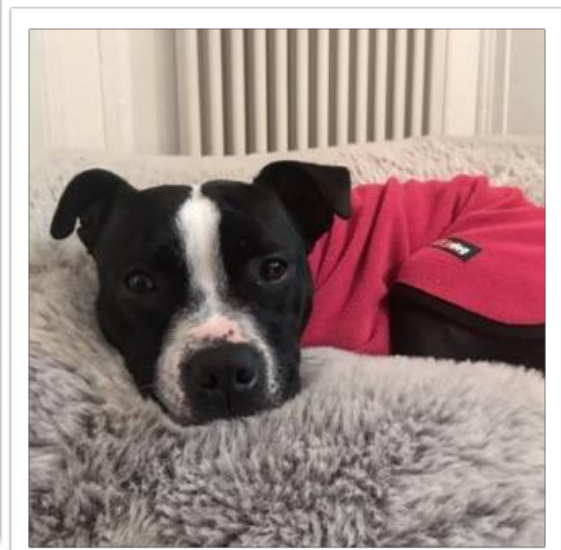
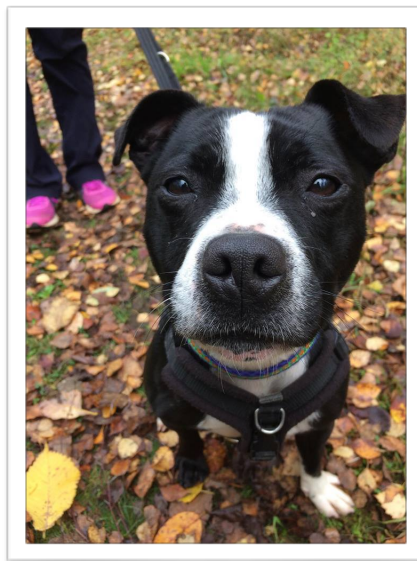
Paws now work with women in custody at both HMP & YOI Polmont and HMP & YOI Cornton Vale, providing a therapeutic, engaging and motivating service working with their team of Ambassadors. Taking part helps to enhance mood of students, enrich social skills, develop an understanding of dog care and increases engagement in education.

Paws are also working at HMP Castle Huntly in Perthshire in partnership with the Scottish Prison Service and the “Dementia Dog Project” (a collaboration between Alzheimer Scotland and Dogs for Good) to develop Scotland’s first prison based assistance dog training programme. Men in custody first complete a Dog Training and Care Course delivered by Paws for Progress, and then have the opportunity to work with the Dementia Dog Project Team to train dogs that will go on to be Dementia Assistance Dogs. These assistance dogs will eventually be paired up with couples in the community, supporting individuals with Dementia and their carers.

The students help the Dementia Dog Instructor in equipping the dogs with a range of skills, such as responding to a timed alarm to remind the person they are supporting to take medication. The addition of the dog to the household helps to reduce separation anxiety and regulate sleeping patterns, providing renewed confidence and a sense of purpose whilst helping both the individual with dementia and their carer cope better along the dementia journey. The qualifications that the men can leave with include topics such as Communication, Numeracy, Working with others, Animal care and Dementia studies. The dogs then go on to transform the lives of people with dementia in their communities.

Some of the dogs currently involved in the rescue dog training programme at HMP & YOI Polmont are:

Floss from Staffie Smiles Rescue (www.staffiesmilesrescues.com) is a sweet and friendly pint sized staffie who recently joined our class! She is a young girl who’s looking for a loving home where she can be pampered, get all the attention and continue with her training.





Leah is a beautiful 5 year old GSD X under the care of B.A.A.R.K (Banff & Aberdeenshire Rescue & Rehoming Kennels – www.barrk.co.uk). She is an affectionate girl once she gets over her initial shyness, and has been known to try to sit on your lap, convinced that she is a lap dog! Leah has come a long way during just a short time working with us, and has really come out of her shell. She would thrive in a loving home where her new family will work on building her confidence



Storm (Scottish Staffordshire Bull Terrier Rescue <http://www.staffierescescotland.co.uk>). Storm is a 7 year old staffie who loves chicken and squeazy cheese, She is a lovely and affectionate girl who enjoys nothing more than a countryside walk and a good back scratch. She is looking for a home where she can be the centre of attention and for a family who will continue the excellent work of her handler at HMP & YOI Polmont to build her confidence around other dogs.





Paws also host a range of events and conferences exploring how interacting with animals can be beneficial for enhancing learning and health, raising awareness about the excellent and innovative Human Animal Interaction services provided across the UK.

If you would like to volunteer, donate or have any questions you can contact info@pawsforprogress.co.uk, or follow Paws for Progress on Twitter or Facebook via the handle @PawsForProgress.

Therapets

As I mentioned, in my day job at school we have recently begun working with Therapets. This is a project run in Scotland by Canine Concern Trust (different organisations are responsible for different areas of the UK) and is supported by the Kennel Club Charitable Trust and Burns Pet Nutrition. An important part of the project for us is Reading With Dogs, which aims to help children who are reluctant to read and lack confidence.

When the children who work in our 'Thinking Room 1' Class heard that the dogs were coming to work with them they were so excited, almost as much as I was! One of the children sat me down though and gently explained that she thought I had made a mistake and I shouldn't be too disappointed....."because doggies can't actually read!"

Some of the children have very little communication, some experience sensory 'disorders' so for example can't tolerate noise, or certain textures. The calming effect of the dogs can be so beneficial for many children who have additional needs. Although certainly 'calm' wasn't how I could describe our wee group on the morning of the first 'Doggy Visit'!

These photographs are from the first visit we had from Harry Greig (Co-ordinator for our region) and his three dogs. The children learned some basic commands and how to give a dog a treat and their confidence around the dogs just grew. So many photographs were taken and I had a very difficult job choosing some for this article, but a picture tells a thousand words so I hope I am forgiven for having so many.

Since this first visit the children have begun Reading with Dogs and are having regular visits from a family of Dalmatians. They not only read to the dogs but learn about pet care and simply enjoy spending time with them. This week one wee boy who really finds reading quite challenging, and indeed nerve wracking, read an entire book to Ayanda the Dalmatian. His mum was so delighted that she came in to school to tell us how pleased she was and that this is changing how he feels about reading.

The possibilities opened up to us through Animal-Human-Interaction are vast and amazing. I hope that this small snapshot has been interesting to read and I encourage people to find out more about it. Maybe your dog could be the next Therapet?

