

Dogs Trust Freedom Project **Providing temporary foster care for dogs belonging to families fleeing domestic violence**



20 DOGS LATER A FOSTER CARER'S STORY

Photo: iStockphoto

Julie, a single mum of 3, has been a volunteer foster carer for the Freedom Project Yorkshire since it was first established in July 2005. During this time she has provided a temporary haven for a number of dogs. Her very first dog was an 18 month old Staffordshire Bull Terrier and since then Julie has gone on to care for breeds ranging from SBT's to Bull Mastiffs and everything in between. All the dogs she has cared for have their own stories:

When Scarlett and Wallace, a pair of beautiful Staffordshire Bull Terriers aged 7 and 12 months old, were referred to the project they were both receiving treatment for mange. Dogs Trust continued their treatment and Julie was responsible for taking them to the vets for special baths. Following veterinary treatment and lots of TLC they recovered and went home happy and healthy dogs. 'When they first arrived they were both unwell and feeling very sorry for themselves but, with time and patience, their personalities soon shone through. Scarlett was the youngest and was

definitely the boss, stealing any toys Wallace played with! Wallace was very sweet and loved getting on the sofa for a cuddle. They weren't the easiest pair to care for because of their ongoing veterinary treatment but it was wonderful to help their owner by continuing the treatment she had started and returning them home in full health'.

Julie knows only too well what victims of domestic violence go through. She says 'I suffered domestic violence myself about 13 years ago and can understand what it's like. You lose everything; your home, all your personal possessions, everything. The thought of losing a member of the family as well is too much to bear. I was one of the lucky ones. There were no services like the Freedom Project when I was experiencing domestic violence but a friend was able to care for both my dogs and my cat when I fled. The women who use this project have no one else to turn to for help'.

Winston was a gorgeous Bull Mastiff and one of Julie's favourites. 'He settled immediately, was brilliant with the kids and

cats and just fitted in so easily; a real gentle giant. He went everywhere with me and had a fan club, you couldn't help but love him'. Winston had come from a particularly violent home and his owner had to flee leaving him behind. Thankfully, the Freedom Project was able to collect him within a couple of days of receiving the referral and place him in a loving foster home with Julie and her family.

Julie says 'I love fostering for the Freedom Project. My little contribution gives those families hope that one day soon they will be reunited with their beloved family pet and can live together in a happy, safe loving environment. For me, the hardest part about fostering is knowing what the dogs have been through. Seeing them cower when they hear a loud noise and looking bewildered when they first arrive is heartbreaking, but watching them grow in confidence and discovering each dog's individual personality is so rewarding. I get a great sense of fulfilment when it's time for them to go home, knowing that they are going back to a family that loves them'.

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LET'S CELEBRATE!



FROM FREEDOM
CLIENT TO
FOSTER CARER



TALKING
TO REFUGE



LET'S CELEBRATE!

It's that time of year again when we celebrate the projects' anniversaries. The Greater London Project celebrated its 5th year of service in June and the Yorkshire Project celebrated its 4th year of service in July. Every year we deal with more referrals to the project and demand for our service is at an all time high.

As always, we are only able to help so many families and their pets because of the ongoing support received from our carers – some of whom have been with us since the start and are now looking after their 20th dog! To those carers and all of our other generous carers, we would like to thank you for your ongoing help, patience and kindness in supporting the project and for sometimes putting up with difficult dogs! We know it's not an easy job, but it's one that is so appreciated by the families we work with.

- 🐾 Since the project began in 2004, we have taken over 624 pets onto the project.
- 🐾 444 of those pets were dogs that we placed with volunteer foster carers and 180 were cats which were boarded through a partnership with Cats Protection.
- 🐾 In 2008 we took referrals from 90 agencies, including the police, housing departments, social services and refuges.
- 🐾 During 2008, staff took a total of 475 enquiries for fostering, a rise of 63% from the previous year.
- 🐾 At any one time we have around 100 volunteer carers registered on the project.
- 🐾 In 2008 the three top breeds placed on the project were Staffordshire Bull Terriers (accounted for 34%), Crossbreeds (mainly Collies, accounted for 10%) and Labradors (accounted for 7%).
- 🐾 An average foster placement is now around 9 months as it's harder for families to find permanent housing – especially in Greater London.

IS OVERFEEDING YOUR DOG A BAD THING?



The simple answer is yes. Overfeeding your dog will have serious health consequences. Obesity can cause heart disease, joint problems, diabetes and arthritis. However, around a third of Britain's dog owners are literally killing their pets with kindness by overfeeding them. Research carried out in 2007 by the PDSA found that 30% of the dogs they treated were obese. This figure was only 20% in 2006. The highest proportion of overweight dogs were found in the North West, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. The research showed that London had the slimmest dog population.

Why does overfeeding occur? Many owners believe their dog is a fussy eater when he doesn't immediately finish all his food but the truth is a dog refuses food when he is not hungry. Owners then will often try a tastier food in order to get their dog to eat. This can keep reoccurring when the best and kindest way to please your dog is to spend time with him playing or walking.

There are also dogs that never seem to get full up and just keep eating, the desire for food is conditioned. The more you give them food on demand the more they expect it. Again it's kinder to provide diversion by a walk or play.

If you give your dog tidbits from the dinner table, that's probably one of the reasons he is overweight. Resist the sad whimpering eyes and just ignore him when he begs. You may have to put him in another room or outside

when you eat if it's too hard to say no. Just remember that you're doing it for him.

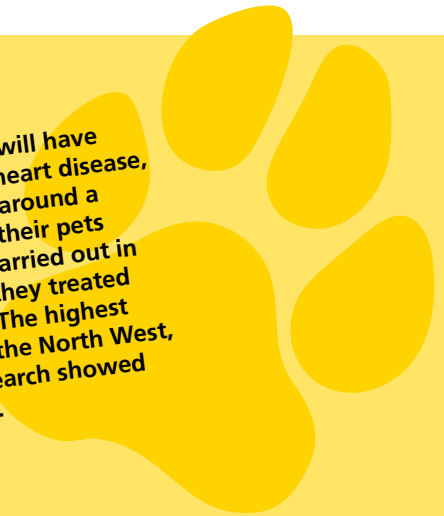
If your dog regularly leaves food behind then this means that he is eating as much as he wants and you could give him a little less. Many dogs are naturally lean because they are active not because they need more food, which if increased could reduce their digestion efficiency.

On a project like Freedom it is very easy to feel sorry for your foster dog and think extra little treats here and there are spoiling the dog when really they should only be used for training and in very small amounts. A finger nail sized treat is enough as a reward. If your dog requires a lot of training then it would be best to measure out his food for the day and use part of this for reward so that you are not piling him with unnecessary calories.

You should weigh your foster dog on a regular basis and see whether he is gaining or losing weight. We can supply special diet food if necessary. If we feel it necessary to put your foster dog on a diet we will suggest gradually decreasing the amount of food you give him. For example, if you normally feed him a cup of food twice a day, reduce it to $\frac{3}{4}$ cup twice a day. Also, continue to give him the same number of meals, just less at each one. This keeps his blood sugar more regulated than if you just feed him once a day.

Bear in mind that older dogs eat less than younger dogs as their metabolism slows down.

And when you're tempted to give your dog extra treats just remember overweight dogs have shortened life spans, often by as much as 15%!



FROM FREEDOM CLIENT TO FOSTER CARER

Former Freedom Project client describes her experience of being both a client and a foster carer.

How did you first hear about the Dogs Trust Freedom Project?

When we eventually fled to a refuge my keyworker told me about the Freedom Project and we looked up the number and phoned the project direct for help with Max our beloved Rottweiler cross that we had had since a puppy.

What were the circumstances in your life that lead you to contact us?

I was abused continually by my drug dealing partner for seven years and I bear the scars of Stanley blade attacks and beatings because I wouldn't take drugs. My partner threatened me, my children and Max daily. At first I felt I couldn't tell the police because he had threatened to cut my children's throats if I did. I changed the locks on the door but it all came to a head when he and another man broke into my house and attacked me. Max and I fought them off and someone had called the police on my behalf because they arrived as the fight was going on. If Max hadn't been there I don't honestly think I would be alive today. We had to leave that day and were relocated to a refuge. Max went to stay at my aunt's but it soon became apparent that she was unable to look after him as she worked very long hours and he was left alone in the house all the time. He became very depressed and it wasn't fair on him at all. Thankfully Dogs Trust intervened.

What did you think when you first referred your dog to the Freedom Project?

They were very helpful and understanding. I had to fill in a questionnaire about us and then sign a contract to give permission for Dogs Trust to take on Max and make any necessary veterinary decisions. At the time I was very upset but I knew that I needed help and that the Freedom Project was my only hope of seeing my dog again.

Was it difficult to hand your dog over to us?

Yes, he was already at my aunt's and she found it terribly difficult to hand him over but the staff reassured us that he would have the best care. I was particularly concerned as he is a Doberman cross Rottweiler so a very large dog and I wasn't sure that anyone would be able to take him on. Luckily there

was a kind family ready and willing to look after him and after several talks with Rosanna, the Freedom Project Co-ordinator, I was happy to let him go.

Were you happy with the contact you received from Freedom Staff regarding your dog?

Obviously we missed him terribly but I could call the staff anytime and received updates and photos of Max frequently. During his stay Max was neutered, which through stress I hadn't got around to doing and couldn't afford to do either. This was a great weight lifted from my already stressed mind and I am very grateful as this not only stops puppies but it also reduces the risk of testicular cancer. Dogs Trust paid for all Max's veterinary bills whilst he was on the Freedom Project. I am so grateful for this help.

Was it easy to get your dog back?

Yes, once we were finally housed Max was returned home within a week. It was the best day of our whole experience, even better than being housed because we were finally able to start our new lives properly with our final member of the family home again.

What made you then decide to foster a dog yourself?

I was amazed that the Freedom Project existed. I thought that if I could give something back then it could show how eternally grateful I am for their help. I spoke to my housing officer about what I wanted to do and he agreed that as long as there are only two dogs in my home that I could foster. In fact my housing officer recently said that what I am doing is a wonderful thing considering what my family has been through. I was overjoyed when I was accepted as a foster carer for the Freedom Project and my first dog arrived.

What has been your experience of fostering?

So far I've fostered three lovely dogs all with different personalities and all a pleasure to look after. Some have needed medical treatment including neutering but this was done as quickly as possible so that their stay with us would be a good one. We don't know what these dogs have been through. Remember, if an abuser can hurt a person they won't think twice about hurting the dog, which often is at the brunt of the attack. All the dogs want love, shelter and reassurance that they will not be hurt again. As long as they are in my care they will get just that and more.



Photo: Stockphoto

Why did you not just adopt another dog permanently?

If I was to adopt a dog I wouldn't be able to foster as I'm only allowed two dogs on my tenancy agreement and that would mean one less foster family for the Freedom Project. Don't forget I've been on both sides of the fostering story. I know first hand what it's like to lose your dog and think you may not be able to have him back. It's heartbreaking to let your dog go but it's the most amazing feeling to get him back.

It's shocking to think that every 30 minutes a woman dies through domestic violence, every 28 seconds the police receive a phone call referring to domestic abuse. A lot of people stay because of pets they can't bear to leave behind. The more people that know we're here the better. I feel honoured to be helping such an important project.

Would you recommend fostering a dog to other people?

Totally! Yes! It feels great to be a foster carer. I know first hand what it's like to give up your old life and begin the arduous task of starting a new life from scratch. It's the hardest thing I've ever had to do. If you can imagine yourself in that situation what would you do? Being a foster carer is a small but very important part of helping someone get back on their feet again. Knowing their pet is safe eases their mind and believe it or not it makes such a difference.



Photo: Stockphoto

WORKING WITH RSPCA PET RETREAT

By working with RSPCA Pet Retreat across Yorkshire, we can now help clients who have family pets other than dogs to access pet fostering services.

When we receive a referral we are now able to enquire about other pets in the household that also need help. If there are,

with the client's permission, we then pass their details onto RSPCA Pet Retreat who also run a fostering service for families fleeing domestic violence.

This means families are not only reunited with their beloved dog but with all their pets once they have found permanent housing.



**For women and children.
Against domestic violence.**

The Freedom Project works closely with organisations such as Refuge, which offer refuge accommodation and support services for women fleeing domestic violence. Here we speak to Norma Bland, Senior Operational Manager at Refuge who enlightens us about the work they carry out:

What is Refuge?

Refuge is the largest specialist service provider of domestic violence services in the country. Alongside providing safe, emergency accommodation and emotional and practical support to women and children experiencing domestic violence, Refuge also provides services for children, individual and group counselling for women experiencing domestic violence and community based outreach services for women. It also runs the Freephone 24-hour National Domestic Violence Helpline in partnership with Women's Aid.

What type of support & assistance is offered to someone fleeing domestic violence?

We offer a wide range of services, from refuges, to community outreach programmes and independent domestic violence advocates, who support very high-risk women through the complicated court system. The women we work with receive one-on-one support to help them regain their independence. Every woman receives emotional support from a specially trained case worker. She will also receive practical support with anything from accessing benefits to feed her children, to taking out court injunctions to help keep her safe.

Once someone contacts Refuge for somewhere to stay, what is the procedure from there?

A refuge worker will contact the woman to take the referral and will go through her and her children's individual needs – at this point if there are any pets in the family we will contact organisations such as the Dogs Trust Freedom Project for help and advice. This is to ensure that we offer the most appropriate refuge space that is available to the family. Arrangements are then made to welcome the woman to the refuge and support with any immediate needs, health, financial or legal is provided. Women often have to leave their homes at very short notice and can arrive with little in the way of clothes and food. The staff keep emergency supplies of basic food, toiletries and clothing in the refuges to support women until they have access to their own things.

What is the average waiting time for a client to be placed in Refuge accommodation?

Women fleeing domestic violence need fast access to a place of safety. Usually a refuge space is found within a few hours however, there is a national shortage of refuges and women sometimes have to stay with friends or family for a short time until an appropriate space is identified.

What are the first few things that happen when a client moves into one of your projects?

Every woman will be allocated her own key worker on joining the service. The key worker will introduce the woman to the service, carry out an initial assessment,

and a risk assessment as a priority and will undertake any immediate crisis work. The focus for the keywork in these early discussions is on building a relationship of trust, and in accommodation based services the key worker will make contact with the woman every day for the first 10 days.

How far along the line is housing dealt with?

Every woman is different and needs a different level of support before she feels ready to move into her own accommodation. The keyworker works closely with the woman to go through her housing options and to explain the choices that she has to make. Until very recently, women in refuges weren't classified as homeless, so waiting times for housing can be incredibly long.

Does Refuge help both women & men?

Refuge only supports women and children, but if any men come to us for support we will always refer them onto a specialist organisation that supports male victims. While there are men who do experience abuse, and all abuse is wrong, women still make up the majority of victims. The statistics show that one in six men experience abuse, compared to one in four women. However, women experiencing domestic violence are four times more likely to experience serious and potentially lethal violence. They are twice as likely to experience repeated attacks and are five times more likely to fear for their lives. So women experiencing domestic violence generally have a greater need for support and are at greater risk.

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Photo: Dogs Trust

BREED PROFILE - STAFFORDSHIRE BULL TERRIER

Also known as the 'Staffie', it is one of the breeds we see most of on both Outreach projects and is the 5th most popular breed in the UK, its country of origin.

The Staffie made its first appearance around the 17th century. A cross between Bulldogs and Terriers, they were initially bred for ratting and dog fighting. With the Humane Act in 1835 making baiting sports and dog fighting unlawful, preservation of the breed was achieved by introducing them to the show world.

Today the Staffie is known as an excellent family pet and is reputed to be exceptionally good with children. In fact they are one of only two breeds recognised by the Kennel Club (and there are over 190!) that have a mention as to their suitability with children.

The life span of a Staffie ranges from about 9 to 16 years. They are quite robust and suffer from relatively few health problems although they tend to be prone to eye problems and, from our experience, skin complaints.

However, it is by no means an easy breed to handle. Being muscular, powerfully built, agile and active, the breed has preserved many of its characteristics that were initially introduced. The Staffie can also be quite headstrong, stubborn, and boisterous. An intelligent dog, he needs plenty of mental stimulation as well as exercise and can benefit tremendously from activities such as obedience and agility training. Early socialisation is a must to get the most out of this breed as a family pet as they tend to prefer human company to that of other animals!

Unfortunately because of their stature and reputation as a fighting breed they are seen by some as a 'macho' dog and the bad handling of many unscrupulous owners have led people to have a somewhat wary regard for this breed.

As with any other breed, responsible and knowledgeable handling will be rewarded by a well balanced, dependable and affectionate member of the family.