

RSPCA Cambridge Clinic — Overview and FAQ

This is a broad-brush summary to give an overview of the way the clinic's finances work. Figures are rounded.

RSPCA Clinic

Provides just over 4,000 treatments p.a.

Monthly costs:

Fixed costs: £3,500 (flat rate fee to Vet School + rates, heating etc.)

Variable costs: Vaccinations, chipping, spay/neuter - owner pays in advance, completely covering our costs. We pass on the money paid to the Vet School.

Owners pay the Vet School direct for the cost of other treatments, so this only impacts on the branch if the owner cannot afford this and asks us for additional help. The Vet School's charges to clients are roughly 1/3 the cost of the same treatment at a private vet.

Additional Variable Costs

Any additional subsidy given to individual clients who can't afford the Vet School's charges.

Costs if we offer to treat and rehome an animal as an alternative to euthanasia.

Payments to the Vet School for treating branch animals (mostly injured strays given first aid at private vets via the NCC [RSPCA National Control Centre]).

Monthly Income from clinic fees (other than vaccinations etc.)

Usually around £2,400

Hence the branch must provide a net subsidy of at least £1,000 each month from general funds in order to keep a basic service running.

Emergency out of hours cover

The Vet School will see *registered* animals outside normal clinic hours in an emergency. Registration is achieved and maintained by the animal being seen at the RSPCA clinic during the previous 24 months. The owner is charged £16 9-5 Monday - Friday and £31 at other times. This fee goes to the School, not the RSPCA.

This arrangement seems to be almost unique in providing low cost help 24/7. My understanding of other branch clinic schemes is that almost all of them rely on clients using the out of hours service of the vet who serves the clinic and paying the full amount. So, although this activity doesn't appear on the "balance sheet" of the branch, it is worth a considerable amount in terms of provision of animal welfare.

It is in the interest of the branch to encourage more people to register their animals so that emergencies can be seen at minimal cost, rather than our volunteers being in the position of having to refuse to cover a £100 out of hours consult at a private vet when they know an animal is suffering.

We are the *only* source of veterinary treatment help in most of our branch area, and

although the PDSA has some PetAid practices in Newmarket and Ely these offer very limited help which is complicated to access because it requires pre-registration before the animal becomes ill. For example the PDSA may refuse to register an animal with a pre-existing skin condition.

The Vet School can and does refuse to see unregistered animals (even if the owner has used the clinic for other pets) or registered animals whose owner can't pay the consult fee. There's potentially a very serious welfare/loss of reputation issue if a seriously suffering animal is turned away.

It is the responsibility of the branch to provide an emergency contact number to receive emergency calls from clients and filter them so that the School is not pestered with calls that are not relevant to them. This is achieved by a mobile rota (branch number is forwarded to volunteers on the rota). This number is also used for general welfare assistance calls to the branch.

There is no way that the branch number can be made inaccessible to the general public while enabling clinic clients to contact it easily (because they lose their registration cards and/or don't understand the point of phoning the number on the card). This means that the rota will inevitably receive calls about unregistered animals and the volunteer on duty needs to be able to do something useful about this. Some can simply be told to attend the next clinic session, but a few do need urgent attention and have owners who won't or can't find the money for a consult at a private vet. We've found by experience that phone rota volunteers don't stay if they have to refuse to give any help at all to non-registered owned animals in an emergency, but that it's possible to retain them if they have the option to authorise covering the consult fee at a private vet.

FAQ

Why don't we just insist the Vet School take out of hours emergency calls direct?

Because they won't do this (and it's not unreasonable considering that at least half of the calls coming in via the recorded message on the clinic answerphone are not about clinic patients but should really have gone to the NCC). They take the view that running the helpline is our problem and it's likely that if we were to discontinue it, they would cease to provide an out of hours service and simply divert cases to the 24 hour commercial emergency practice, which would be unaffordable by most clinic clients.

Can we send sick/injured log no animals direct to the Vet School?

No: branch animals cannot be fast-tracked to the Vet School; they must be seen at our clinic first in order to be eligible for treatment at the Vet School Hospital. This is because, from the Vet School's point of view, the value of the clinic lies in its use for teaching purposes and their primary interest is in letting students observe incoming cases and their diagnosis.

Why don't we stop owners who are on Working Tax Credit from using the clinic and save money that way?

There is no financial advantage to the branch in restricting the numbers of people who attend the clinic because the amount we pay the School doesn't relate to numbers except in

the case of neuter/vaccinate/chip on which we recover all our costs from the owner.

Why do we have to impose a restriction on the area the clinic covers?

The Vet School imposed a hard limit on the clinic catchment area after one client created difficulties for them because she couldn't get transport to attend for follow-up treatment. This illustrates why it is very important that we don't do (or permit others to do) anything that the School staff perceive as "being difficult".

Would it help to apply for our medicines to be treated as VAT exempt?

Except in the special case of vaccinations which we order via HQ, all medicines are purchased by the Vet School and sold at cost price to our clients. All clients pay the School direct for treatments and medicines (except for vaccinations and spay/neuter), so there is no benefit to the branch in trying to negotiate any separate special deals.

What happens when owners can't afford the Vet School's charges?

At one time the Vet School used to set up payment plans for owners who couldn't pay the full amount up front. They no longer do this (because people did not pay!) and currently insist that most operations are paid for in full in advance (used to be on collection of the animal) which gives clients very little time to try to borrow from family etc. They've also recently increased the charges for operations. Charges are still around a third of the cost at private vets, but private vets' charges have increased significantly above the rate of inflation.

For a period of a year after the Vet School originally stopped running payment plans, the branch attempted to run a scheme whereby we would pay the School and the owner would pay us back. This was financially impossible because many owners didn't pay, or paid very slowly, and because our clients genuinely are poor, so nearly everyone asked to come on the scheme, including those who could have raised the money up front with some effort.

Orthopaedic (bone) operations have always (past 20 years) been a problem because they are very expensive. We've tried various permutations on direct subsidy/offering chance to sign animal over for rehoming/offering time to pay. Currently we cannot afford to offer extra help, so some animals are being put to sleep instead.