

Spirit in Mind Annual Conference

Natural Healing: Ecology and Wellbeing



SCAS member Angela Barker, and her team recently organised this most wonderful conference held in the magnificent Dewsbury Minster in Dewsbury, Kirklees, West Yorkshire. Some of this impressive Minster date from the 12th c.

The conference commenced with introductions from Mike Gartland, Head of Pastoral and Spiritual Care and Marie Burnham, Chair of South West Yorkshire Partnership Foundation Trust.

The conference presentations encompassed human-animal interactions, animal welfare, horticulture therapy and nature education. There was much interest from the delegates and, as a result of the conference, it is intended that a special interest group will be established locally.

The first series of presentations were concerned with human-animal interactions and were delivered by SCAS members Elizabeth Ormerod, Angela Barker, Belinda Johnston and Rebecca Leonardi. These were followed by presentations addressing animal welfare, horticulture therapy and forest schools.

Companion Animals in Promotion and Support of Mental Health

www.scas.org.uk

Dr Elizabeth Ormerod, Chairman of SCAS, delivered the keynote address. She is a retired companion animal veterinarian who has been interested in human-animal relationships since early childhood when she often accompanied her father, an agricultural engineer, to farms throughout central Scotland. Even as a young child she recognised special relationships between farm hands with special needs and the animals they cared for. As an undergraduate she observed bond relationships between patients and cattle in a psychiatric hospital with a dairy farm. During her 40 years in veterinary practice, and in study visits to HAI and AAI programmes throughout the UK, across USA, in Japan and in other European countries she was learned more about the importance and potential of the human-animal bond for human health and wellbeing, for animal welfare and of benefits for society. She pioneered the concept of bond-centred veterinary practice and veterinary community outreach; introduced AAI programmes to schools, nursing homes, hospitals and prisons; co-founded Canine Partners; created and delivered training in AAI; and acted as client advocate regarding pets in housing.



Her presentation described the history of Animal-assisted Interventions (AAI), with a focus on mental health. People new to AAI assume that this is a new treatment modality. However, she explained that healing effects have been attributed to the presence of dogs since the time of the goddess Gula in the Ur III period in Mesopotamia. Elizabeth provided examples of eminent health professionals down the centuries who prescribed contact with animals for health benefits. Some current programmes were referred to and she also described some of her own work in high secure establishments.

Canine Befrienders

[Canine Befrienders project - South West Yorkshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust](#)



Angela Barker has over 10 years' experience of working in NHS mental health services where she is responsible for recruiting, training and supervising volunteers to support service users in inpatient wards, and in the community. Angela described the work of the Canine Befrienders programme which she has very carefully planned and developed within the NHS using the SCAS Code of Practice. Teams of Canine Befrienders have been recruited, being assessed by a canine behaviourist who provides ongoing support. It is so encouraging to learn of this work, developed within the NHS, and which could be implemented by other NHS Trusts.

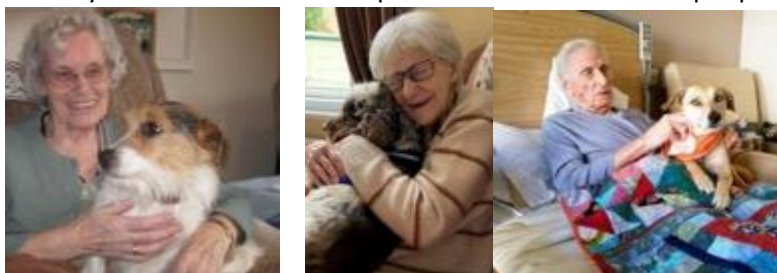
Our Special Friends

[Our Special Friends](#)



Dr Belinda Johnston is a veterinarian who studied person-centred counselling and bereavement support and has volunteered with Cruse and the Samaritans. Through her experience, realising the need to support people and animals in times of vulnerability, she founded and runs Our Special Friends (OSF) in Suffolk. The charity has developed an extensive range of outreach work and is a key community service. The work of OSF includes AAI, finding suitable pets for vulnerable people, pet bereavement support and pet fostering. The latter requires finding suitable foster placements until pet and owner can be reunited e.g. following a period of hospitalisation. Highly complex cases require a transdisciplinary approach. Belinda raised that carers for vulnerable people could assist by being mindful of the needs of pets when they visit clients. For example, by checking a pet's water dish when they visit. Interestingly OSF is also receiving interest and some support from a local NHS Trust.

OSF has demonstrated its effectiveness in providing essential support of vulnerable pet owners and their pets. There is clearly a need to extend such provision to all vulnerable people and their pets.



Paws for Progress

[Paws for Progress](#)



Dr Rebecca Leonardi has a background in psychology and research methodology. Rebecca gave an update of the work of Paws for Progress, a very progressive programme which she developed in Polmont Young Offenders Institution with the Scottish Prison Service in 2011. The programme rehabilitates rescue dogs and also helps to rehabilitate the offenders who train the dogs. Rebecca has comprehensively evaluated this, the first prison-based dog rescue training programme. The programme has expanded its remit to work in several other prisons with adult male and female

prisoners. They also have programmes to build resilience in at-risk children. Rebecca consults internationally on the development of prison-based dog rescue programmes. She was instrumental in the development of the Stirling Human Animal Research Centre (SHAIR) and Masters in Human-Animal Interactions at the University of Stirling.

Millington's Magical Barn Animal Sanctuary

www.millingtonsmagicalbarn.com



Jake Radcliffe explained about why and how he has created an animal sanctuary. It started 5 years ago when he was involved in cat rescue and now with the support of his girlfriend, a veterinary nurse, cares for over 90 animals including cattle, sheep, goats, alpacas, pigs and poultry. He shared that rescuing and caring for the animals, despite many challenges, has been good for his mental health. Realising this, Jake is now considering having the sanctuary as the base for an AAI programme.

Serenity Wellbeing Gardens

[Serenity Wellbeing Gardens | Louise Iredale - Horticultural Therapist](#)

Loise Iredale had always found that gardening supported her mental health and had got her through some troubled times. In 2021 she left the corporate world to retrain as a horticulture therapist.



Louise now uses her training to share the therapeutic benefits of gardening. And to encourage people to reconnect with nature.

Forest School

Gisella Hoyle grew up on a farm in South Africa and has always been highly attuned to nature. She is a Forest School Leader, Narrative Therapist and author. Gisella encourages exploration of nature



through stories. Delegates were invited to work in small groups, select a feathered twig and then take this on a journey through the beautiful grounds of the Minster. On return to the conference, they were invited to share their experiences. This was a lovely, interactive way to bring a close to the presentations.

