# How do people with animal companions and without respond to movement communications?

## Research Report

Animal Think Tank

July 2025

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# Introduction

Strategic communications is about recognising that people are persuaded by different messages and narratives depending on where they are in their **journey** to supporting animal freedom. It's about nudging people further along this journey, and **activating different audiences in different ways**.
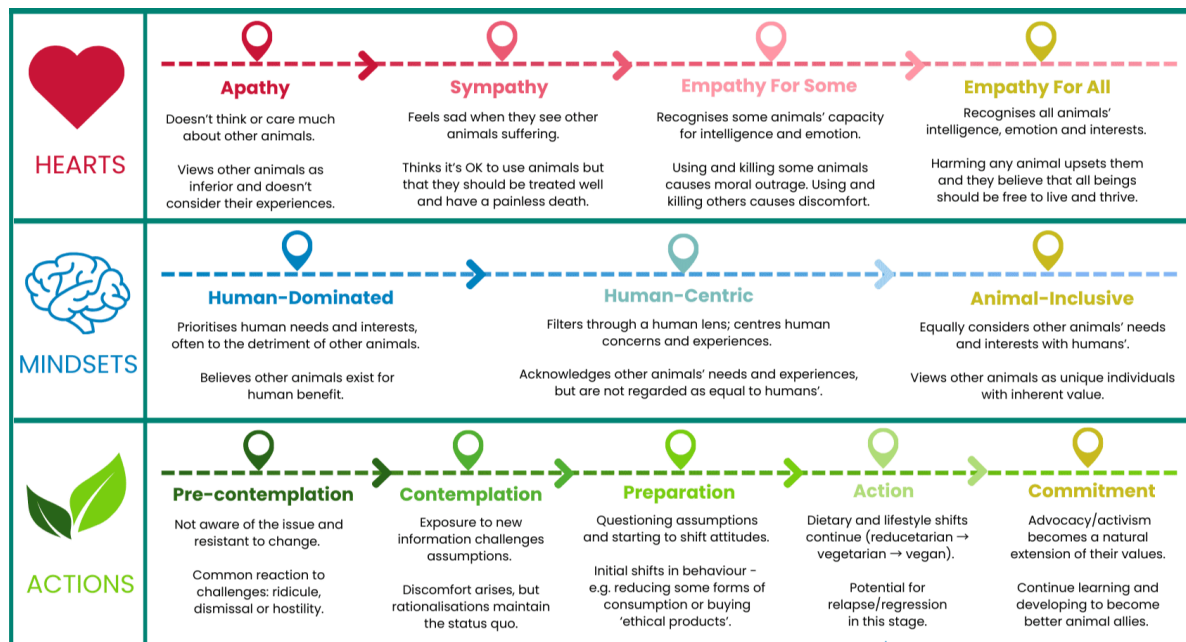
Viewing the UK public as a **spectrum of allies**, there's a key segment our movement can focus on: **'persuadables'** – those ambivalent or conflicted about animal freedom, yet potentially open to change. They're likely to make up the largest portion of the public, so it's crucial to understand what kinds of narratives and communication approaches they find persuasive.

Previous Animal Think Tank research found that many active supporters of animal freedom were initially inspired by their relationship with another animal. Building on this finding, we explored whether sharing a home with **animal companions (ACs)** influences openness to animal freedom messaging compared to those **without animals companions (Non-ACs)**.

In 2024, we conducted focus groups with ACs and Non-ACs to:

- explore differences in empathy, attitudes, and behaviours
- identify persuasive narratives
- and draw insights for movement communication.

# Key Insights

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **HEARTS** | **Apathy**<br>Doesn't think or care much about other animals.<br><br>Views other animals as inferior and doesn't consider their experiences. | **Sympathy**<br>Feels sad when they see other animals suffering.<br><br>Thinks it's OK to use animals but that they should be treated well and have a painless death. | **Empathy For Some**<br>Recognises some animals' capacity for intelligence and emotion.<br><br>Using and killing some animals causes moral outrage. Using and killing others causes discomfort. | **Empathy For All**<br>Recognises all animals' intelligence, emotion and interests.<br><br>Harming any animal upsets them and they believe that all beings should be free to live and thrive. |
| **MINDSETS** | **Human-Dominated**<br>Prioritises human needs and interests, often to the detriment of other animals.<br><br>Believes other animals exist for human benefit. | | **Human-Centric**<br>Filters through a human lens; centres human concerns and experiences.<br><br>Acknowledges other animals' needs and experiences, but are not regarded as equal to humans'. | **Animal-Inclusive**<br>Equally considers other animals' needs and interests with humans'.<br><br>Views other animals as unique individuals with inherent value. |
| **ACTIONS** | **Pre-contemplation**<br>Not aware of the issue and resistant to change.<br><br>Common reaction to challenges: ridicule, dismissal or hostility. | **Contemplation**<br>Exposure to new information challenges assumptions.<br><br>Discomfort arises, but rationalisations maintain the status quo. | **Preparation**<br>Questioning assumptions and starting to shift attitudes.<br><br>Initial shifts in behaviour – e.g. reducing some forms of consumption or buying 'ethical products'. | **Action**<br>Dietary and lifestyle shifts continue (reducetarian → vegetarian → vegan).<br><br>Potential for relapse/regression in this stage. **Commitment**<br>Advocacy/activism becomes a natural extension of their values.<br><br>Continue learning and developing to become better animal allies. |

## 1. The journey to supporting animal freedom involves three key strands:

Empathy with other animals (hearts), attitudes and beliefs (mindsets), and behaviours (actions). Nudging people forward requires knowing where they are and what resonates.

## 2. One journey, two positions.

People with animal companions (ACs) generally sit midway. Those without (Non-ACs) are mostly at the start. Both are stalled for different reasons – ACs believe they're 'doing their bit', while Non-ACs keep emotional distance or take a 'ignorance is bliss' approach.

## 3. Progress or paralysis hinges on narratives.

Narratives about other animals' rich inner lives and suffering deepen empathy. Narratives depicting other animals as inferior or for human use stall progress. What's missing in people's mindsets are narratives that clarify what animal freedom looks like.

## 4. 'Natural' and 'necessary' narratives prevent behaviour change.

The 4Ns – Nice, Necessary, Natural, Normal – help justify animal use. While 'nice' and

'normal' relate to comfort and preference, 'natural' and 'necessary' make use feel inevitable. Flipping these (e.g. framing factory farming is unnatural and unnecessary) is key to nudging people forwards.

### 5. Identity is leverage.

ACs see themselves as good, informed animal lovers. Non-ACs see themselves as average consumers. Reinforcing (not challenging) these identities keeps people receptive. Offering an empowered 'citizen identity' encourages engagement beyond consumerism.

### 6. Creating tension can spark progress.

When hearts, mindsets, and actions align, people become settled in their journey and stop moving forward. Sparking cognitive dissonance – tension between what people feel, believe, and do – prompts a desire to realign and restore comfort, but only if a clear path forward is visible.

### 7. Perspective-taking enhances empathy.

This research, as well as others (e.g. Banach et al., 2024), shows that encouraging people to adopt the viewpoint of other animals can shift attitudes and behaviours more than facts alone. This can deepen emotional connection and motivate change.

### 8. Make less visible animals familiar.

Increase familiarity with farmed animals and other animals by highlighting their intelligence, emotions and individuality, helping people relate to them as they do to animal companions, which can strengthen empathy and support for their freedom.

### 9. Allow space to reflect.

Creating space for people to think through the issue, without pressure or judgement, supports deeper engagement and internalisation of messages.

### 10. Environmental messaging can be double-edged.

It can motivate modest dietary shifts but can limit broader ethical engagement with animal freedom.

# The Journey to Supporting Animal Freedom

The journey towards supporting animal freedom involves three interconnected strands:

## 1. Empathy (Hearts):

*People's capacity to feel compassion and connect emotionally with other animals' experiences, needs, and inner lives.*

- Those living with animal companions (**ACs**) tend to have stronger empathy, developed through daily connection.
- **Non-ACs** often maintain emotional distance from other animals, making empathy harder to develop.

## 2. Mindsets:

*Beliefs and narratives people use to justify or challenge animal exploitation.*

- **Harmful mindsets** include viewing animals as property or commodities, denying their complex emotions and psychological suffering, or asserting animal use is 'natural' and 'necessary'. These reduce discomfort but block progress.
- Many **harmful mindsets** are reinforced by industry messages, such as the 'high welfare' myth or claims that eating 'meat' is necessary as part of a balanced diet.
- **Helpful mindsets** recognise other animals' rich mental lives, frame animal freedom as social justice, and challenge individual lifestyle changes as insufficient by themselves – emphasising the need for systemic change.

## 3. Actions:

*Behaviours that reflect support for or opposition to animal freedom.*

- **ACs** often believe they are already 'doing their bit' through caring for their companions and being 'ethical consumers', which can stall further change.
- **Non-ACs** tend to avoid actions due to emotional distance and lack of connection.

## Group Profiles and Current Journey Positions

**Animal Companion Group (ACs):**

- Generally further along the journey and typically occupy a midway position, with moderate empathy and more positive mindsets about other animals.
- See themselves as caring, informed, and already contributing through animal companion care and ethical consumption.
- Often stall on their journey due to a sense of already 'doing enough'.
- More receptive to systemic messaging when it acknowledges their progress and offers clear next steps.

**Non-Animal Companion Group (Non-ACs):**

- Closer to the journey's start, with lower empathy and stronger justifying narratives, (e.g. human superiority, necessity of animal use).
- They often:
    - maintain emotional distance;
    - avoid discomfort through denial (e.g. of other animals intelligence and emotions, of reality of what is being done to other animals, or of credibility of the message and/or messenger);
    - employ an 'ignorance is bliss' approach to reduce discomfort.
- Less likely to take action and require gentle, relatable messaging that connects to shared values.
- May resist direct challenges but respond to narratives that normalise concern for other animals.

**Overlap and Variation:**

Both groups exhibit variation and are not homogenous; some Non-ACs show empathy, some ACs question their role. These positions reflect common patterns rather than strict categories. Therefore, messaging should consider this nuance, avoiding overgeneralisation.

## Barriers to Progress

- Many **ACs** have reached a point where their empathy, mindsets, and behaviours align, reducing cognitive dissonance and making them comfortable in their worldview, which reduces motivation for further change.
- For **Non-ACs**, similar alignment results in little motivation to begin the journey at all.
- **Both groups** use justifications to protect identity and beliefs, underpinned by entrenched harmful narratives, like human superiority or the notion that other animals have a 'purpose'.
- **Industry narratives**, including myths about 'high welfare' and claims about the necessity of eating 'meat', reinforces these mindsets.

## Cognitive Dissonance

*The tension experienced when empathy, beliefs, and behaviours are misaligned.*

- Cognitive dissonance creates discomfort that can motivate change if people recognise this tension and see a clear path forward to resolve it.
- **ACs** experience dissonance as conflict between their caring identity and continued support for animal exploitation.
- **Non-ACs** often minimise or avoid dissonance through emotional distancing or denial of other animals' intelligence and emotions.

## Helpful and Harmful Narratives

- **Harmful narratives** include human superiority, the 'purpose' of using other animals for human benefit, and industry-backed 'high welfare' myths.
- **Helpful narratives** evoke empathy by emphasising other animals' abilities and psychological suffering, and highlight benefits of plant-based eating.
- Some narratives resonate with both groups; others may advance one group while causing resistance in the other.

## Key Insights and Messaging Implications

- Emotional connection (empathy) is foundational for shifting attitudes and behaviours.
- The narratives people encounter influence whether they remain stuck or move forward on their journey.
- Cognitive dissonance presents an opportunity for change, if managed carefully.
- Collective, systemic approaches resonate more than messaging focused solely on individual consumer choices.
- Messaging and advocacy should be tailored to key journey stages — those just beginning and those progressed but stalled — to avoid reactance and support movement forward.

# Messaging Recommendations

*Address different journey stages with tailored messages
for ACs and Non-ACs*

| Encouraging the first steps | |
|---|---|
| Those at the start of their journey (**Non-ACs**) often feel **distant from other animals,** seeing humans and animals as separate and vastly different. They tend to **avoid learning about the impact of their choices** and hold tightly to a '**meat-eater' identity** that feels deeply familiar and normal. | • Use vivid but **non-graphic stories** highlighting **psychological harm** and other animals' **emotional capacities**.<br>• Employ trusted everyday voices (family doctors, teachers, vets) alongside aspirational figures (chefs, athletes) to question 'meat is necessary' and **normalise small plant-based shifts.**<br>• Frame vegan/plant-based choices as part of a **mainstream social wave**, not a fringe lifestyle.<br>• **Begin with more widely opposed issues** (e.g. zoo confinement) before linking to farmed animals. |
| **Progress beyond the midpoint** | |
| Those at the midpoint of their journey (**ACs**) identify as **animal lovers** and take pride in being **'good' people**, and **have made lifestyle changes** to reflect this. Yet, they remain within a **'high welfare' mindset**, unable to fully see or challenge the wider system of animal exploitation. | • Expose farming as a **systemic problem**, inherently harmful regardless of scale or method, using whistle-blowers and farmers-turned-critics.<br>• Gently challenge 'natural/necessary' narratives by combining **health frames with values-based messages.** Use trusted health voices (like doctors) alongside animal lovers like them (behaviourists, vets).<br>• Acknowledge progress, then shift identity from 'ethical shopper' to '**engaged citizen**'. Spotlighting collective actions, like boycotts and local campaigns protecting 'all the animals we love'. |

## Appealing to 'persuadables' (middle ground)

| | |
|---|---|
| Regardless of where they are on the journey, these **messages and approaches have strong potential to spark progress** among many in the 'persuadable' middle ground. | <ul><li>**Animal abilities** - Use Attenborough-style storytelling to spark awe at other animals' rich inner lives and cultures, paired with examples of psychological suffering to invite perspective-taking.</li><li>**Social progress** - Celebrate past wins (e.g. bans on 'fur' farming and 'wild' animals used in circuses) to position animal freedom as the next step in a fairer society.</li><li>**Social-proof** - Use social-proof (e.g. '3 in 4 Britons now…') to normalise change and reduce the fear of standing out.</li><li>**Allow reflective space** - Avoid drawing conclusions for people, supporting self-directed reflection.</li></ul> |

# Methodology

Animal Think Tank conducted six online focus groups with members of the public, recruited via a research agency. Three groups included participants living with animal companions (ACs), and three groups without animal companions (Non-ACs). Each group had 4–5 participants, diverse in genders, ethnicity, and age. Sessions lasted around two hours.
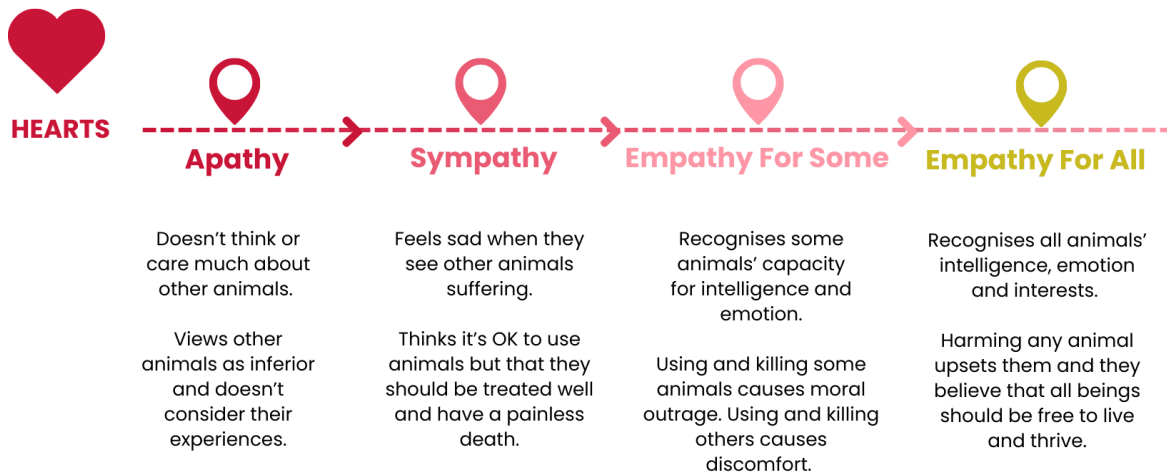
Facilitators introduced prompts exploring issues affecting other animals, and attitudes towards human–animal relationships, while remaining neutral.

**Notes:**
- Focus groups took place before Animal Rising's 2024 campaign exposing misinformation behind the RSPCA Assured labelling scheme and before legal changes recognising animal companions as sentient beings rather than property.
- While this report uses terms like 'fellow animals' and 'other animals', during focus groups, only 'animals' was used, to mirror public vocabulary and reduce reactance.

# The Empathy Journey

*Empathy – the ability to emotionally connect with and care about other animals' experiences – is foundational for shifting attitudes and behaviours.*

**HEARTS**

**Apathy**

Doesn't think or care much about other animals.

Views other animals as inferior and doesn't consider their experiences.

**Sympathy**

Feels sad when they see other animals suffering.

Thinks it's OK to use animals but that they should be treated well and have a painless death.

**Empathy For Some**

Recognises some animals' capacity for intelligence and emotion.

Using and killing some animals causes moral outrage. Using and killing others causes discomfort.

**Empathy For All**

Recognises all animals' intelligence, emotion and interests.

Harming any animal upsets them and they believe that all beings should be free to live and thrive.

## Differences Between Groups

**Animal Companion Group (ACs):**

- Further along in their empathy journey, often expressing *sympathy* and *empathy for some* animals.
- Living with other animals fosters stronger empathy through daily interaction and bonds.
- Spoke positively about some animals and acknowledged their emotions, personalities, and social lives, making the harms they face more tangible.
- More awareness than Non-ACs of issues affecting some animals, such as factory farming.

> *"It makes me think of pets that I've chosen to have euthanised... I've carefully planned how I orchestrate their death basically because it is the kindest thing for them... so thinking about slaughtering rather than euthanising is horrific."* AC participant
>
> *"I do believe that animals feel joy, sadness, grief, and empathy."* AC participant
>
> *"There's intelligence on so many levels... they [animals] create a complex architecture... I find most animals incredibly intelligent. We couldn't do what many of them are doing."* AC participant

**Non-Animal Companion Group (Non-ACs):**

- Also showed *sympathy* and *empathy for some* animals, but were more likely to show *apathy*, due to emotional distance and lack of direct contact.
- More likely to express derogatory views, portraying other animals as unintelligent and instinct-driven, downplaying their inner lives, and at times openly admitting they didn't care about certain species.
- Often drew on an **animals are different** narrative, positioning other animals as inferior to humans.
- Some expressed fear toward some animals, which significantly hindered empathy by reinforcing an **'us versus them'** mindset. Some animals were seen as **threats** — whether through physical harm (e.g. biting or escaping) or potential disease transmission.

> *"[if]... an animal's escaped, the first thing is it's a threat to humans. You want it to be captured straight away, regardless of its feelings... I couldn't give too much about its thoughts and feelings... I'd see it as a threat and I don't want it roaming the streets, I'd want it captured and caged."* Non-AC participant
>
> *"If I saw a human mistreating a dog, for example, like kicking a dog, treating it badly, I would feel empathy for the dog... if it [the dog] was just attacking a human, then it doesn't deserve to have its life."* Non-AC participant

## Barriers to Empathy

- Psychological mechanisms protect people from discomfort but hinder empathy development. These include emotional distancing, denial of other animals' intelligence or feelings, and rationalisations that justify ongoing use.
- While participants sometimes compared farmed animals to their own companions or noted similarities in how harm might affect fellow animals and humans, they rarely engaged in personal perspective-taking by imagining themselves in the animal's place.
- Harmful narratives portray other animals as lacking complex emotions, existing only to serve human purposes, or as property.
- Cultural norms and industry messaging reinforce these barriers by promoting myths such as the 'high welfare' label or claims that eating 'animal products' is necessary and natural.

## Narratives That Build Empathy

- Stories highlighting other animals' rich emotional lives, social bonds, intelligence, and capacity for psychological suffering consistently evoke empathy.
- Framing other animals as sentient beings with individual experiences encourages perspective-taking and emotional engagement.
- Visual imagery and storytelling that individualise other animals without excessive anthropomorphism foster connection and avoid alienation.

*"I can imagine if we're in the place of the animal, we're taken from our natural environment, we're put behind glass screens for humans and other animals to look at us... So I can imagine that they would suffer long-term conditions such as psychosis or fear."* AC participant
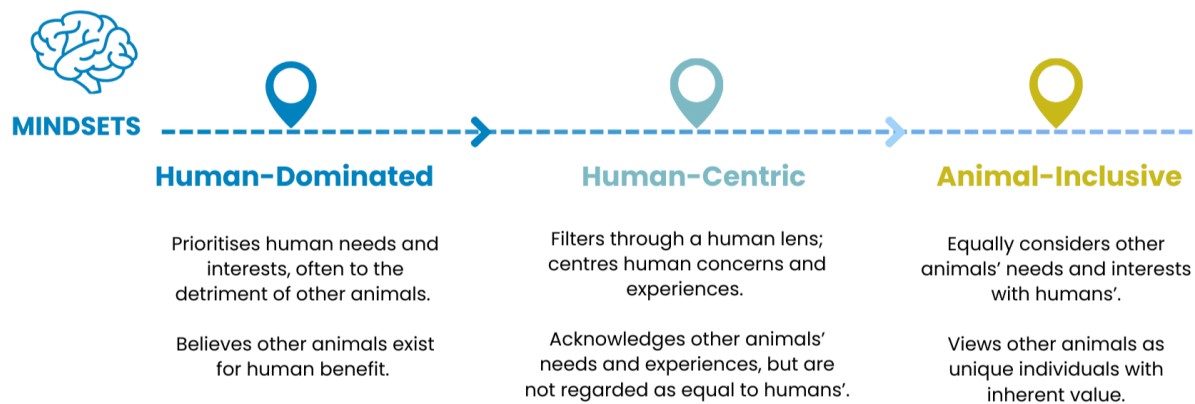
*"Humans are more intelligent than most animals... but it does not automatically follow that animals feel less emotions or that their emotions are less valuable or that they should therefore be a resource for humans."* AC participant

# Messaging Recommendations

- **Use narratives and messengers emphasising shared feelings and values** to bridge empathy gaps. Trusted voices such as vets, animal carers, and relatable everyday people make empathy accessible.
- **Avoid graphic or shocking content early in the journey**; instead, build empathy gradually through positive, relatable stories. Shocking content is more impactful to audiences much further along in their empathy journey.
- **Pair narratives of animal abilities and psychological harm** to encourage perspective-taking and deepen empathy, especially for those without animal companions who may hold fear-based views. Research ([Banach et al., 2024](#)) shows it is more effective at shifting attitudes and behaviours than simply sharing facts.
- **Increase familiarity with less visible other animals** — such as those farmed for food or used in research — to build empathy closer to that felt for companions and free-living animals.
- **Use familiar storytelling approaches** (e.g. styles like David Attenborough documentaries) to foster connection with other animals rarely encountered and inspire awe.
- **Highlight similarities between humans and other animals**, such as shared emotions and family bonds, to counter fear, reduce apathy, and reach those early in the journey who avoid engagement through 'ignorance is bliss' tactics.
- **Provide reflective space without judgement**, allowing people to explore feelings and beliefs at their own pace.
- **Centre messaging on other animals' needs and interests**, avoiding human-centred interventions that risk reinforcing the idea that animals exist for human use (e.g. chick-hatching projects). This approach honours those with animal companions, who primarily build empathy through direct interaction.

# The Mindsets Journey

*Mindsets encompass the beliefs, attitudes, and narratives people hold about other animals and their use, shaping whether they justify or challenge exploitation.*

**MINDSETS**

**Human-Dominated**

Prioritises human needs and interests, often to the detriment of other animals.

Believes other animals exist for human benefit.

**Human-Centric**

Filters through a human lens; centres human concerns and experiences.

Acknowledges other animals' needs and experiences, but are not regarded as equal to humans'.

**Animal-Inclusive**

Equally considers other animals' needs and interests with humans'.

Views other animals as unique individuals with inherent value.

## Differences Between Groups

**Animal Companion Group (ACs):**

- Further along in their mindsets journey.
- Generally hold more positive mindsets, recognising other animals as sentient beings deserving of respect.
- Were less likely to hold *human-dominated* views and were more likely to question the narrative of *human superiority,* reflecting on harmful human behaviours, such as wars, violence, and ecological destruction.
- Emphasised that humans should not abuse any perceived power over those more 'vulnerable'.
- However, many still accept some use as 'necessary' or 'natural', often influenced by welfare-focused narratives.
- ACs tend to see themselves as ethical consumers, which can limit systemic engagement.

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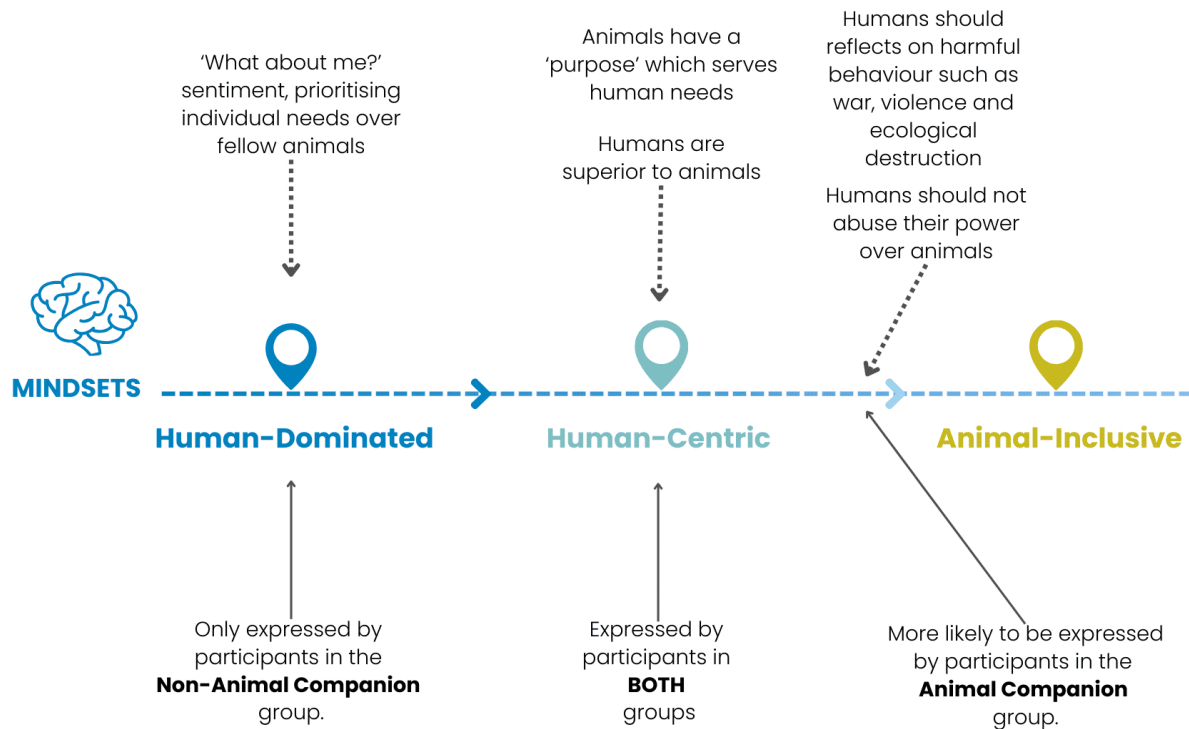**Non-Animal Companion Group (Non-ACs):**

- Progressed the least on their mindset journey.
- More likely to endorse entrenched justifications, such as human superiority, the '4Ns' (Nice, Necessary, Natural, Normal), and the belief that animal use is inevitable, to justify their behaviours and attitudes.
- More likely to hold *human-dominated* views, prioritising their own needs over those of fellow animals, particularly when discussing behaviour around diet.

The diagram below highlights the views most commonly held by each group:

**MINDSETS**

Human-Dominated — 'What about me?' sentiment, prioritising individual needs over fellow animals

Human-Centric — Animals have a 'purpose' which serves human needs; Humans are superior to animals

Animal-Inclusive — Humans should reflects on harmful behaviour such as war, violence and ecological destruction; Humans should not abuse their power over animals

Human-Dominated — Only expressed by participants in the **Non-Animal Companion** group.

Human-Centric — Expressed by participants in **BOTH** groups

Animal-Inclusive — More likely to be expressed by participants in the **Animal Companion** group.

## Human-Centric Mindset

This dominant mindset, present in both groups, led participants to focus on human experiences, even when prompted to consider animal suffering. E,g, when discussing the psychological toll of slaughterhouse work, they focused on workers' mental health and support needs, with little reflection on the experience of the animals suffering.

## Human-Dominated Mindset

Non-ACs often placed themselves at the centre of discussions, focusing on personal needs and risks rather than animal welfare or systemic issues. Topics like antibiotic use or fast-growing animals were framed as threats to human health, not concerns for farmed animals. Personal choice was frequently used to justify behaviour, and concern for an issue was more likely when it was perceived to affect them directly, or people like them.

> *"They feed chickens hormone treatments that make a six-week chicken look like a six-month chicken, so they get a greater turnover of growing and slaughtering the chickens, so who knows what we're eating when they're putting in these hormones in the chicken's feed?"* Non-AC participant

## Animal-Inclusive Mindset

Participants in both groups struggled to adopt an inclusive mindset towards fellow animals, finding it difficult to imagine meaningful co-existence, instead proposing either separation or increased human-led interaction.

> *"...rebuilding their habitats, helping them reclaim old habitats, rather than us building more towns and cities, and doing away with more rural space. We should try to do more rewilding, giving animals more safe spaces to live where they don't come into conflict with us so much."* AC participant

ACs were most likely to acknowledge that the status quo needs changing. However, speciesist thinking still shaped their views. They were most likely to advocate for 'wildlife' to be factored into human plans, while the autonomy of animal companions was rarely recognised, and other animals seen as having a '*purpose*', such as those farmed for food, were simply viewed as needing high welfare standards.

Non-ACs also struggled with the idea of co-existence, with some mocking animal rights and using exaggerated scenarios to portray such views as extreme or unrealistic.

> *"I think if we're advocating for every animal to be released and chickens to roam freely... then I would clearly have an issue with that as I would with family of chickens wanting their own passports and moving next door."* Non-AC participant

# Narratives that connect or divide

**1.** The facilitator shared research showing that **speciesism** is linked to greater dehumanisation of marginalised groups, and is associated with increased racism, sexism, homophobia.

Responses to this statement asserted a fundamental separation and difference between humans and other animals.

*"...because they're an animal shouldn't mean that as humans, you have the right to treat them how you like, but at the same time they're not human. So there is that difference."*

*"I just don't ever, in my mind, link animals to social human behaviour."*

*" we've got the intelligence... we have emotions. I'm not saying animals don't have these things, but... human beings are not animals, we may be animals, but we're more evolved animals, we're back at the top of the food chain."*

**2.** Immediately afterwards, the facilitator shared the following statement about **psychological harm**:

"Animal exploitation often results in stress, depression and abnormal behaviours in confined or unnatural environments, like farms, zoos and laboratories. Animals can show signs of psychosis or aggression, harming themselves or others due to frustration or lack of mental stimulation."

Responses to this statement focused on how humans and other animals feel the same, and often expressed

*"...they've been so badly mistreated, they have a terrible fear of humans... the same as a human who's been, you know, had harm caused to them by a fellow human would feel the same way."*

*"Mistreating, exploitation, of course, it leads to them to be subdued and frightened, and it hurts them the same as it would a human."*

*"I think it makes sense, like this affects them, you know – stress depression*

| sympathy and empathy for fellow animals. | *abnormal behaviours. I feel sad that it happens to them."* |

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The **human superiority** narrative was evident in references to a *natural orde*r, *hierarchy*, and the *food chain,* which positioned humans at the top.

Participants highlighted human intelligence and technological progress, and judged fellow animals against human traits, describing them as voiceless, less evolved or unintelligent. This reinforced the idea that humans are the 'benchmark', making it harder to recognise other animals' intrinsic worth and slowing progress towards an animal-inclusive perspective.

> *"I do think human life does take precedence. It just matters that bit more."*
> Non-AC participant

The idea that other **animals have a purpose** was deeply embedded across both groups, shaping views of certain animals as companions, food, research subjects, or parts of the ecosystem. Even when participants acknowledged traits like intelligence, these were typically framed in terms of usefulness — such as dogs being valued for their roles as guide dogs or police dogs. Farmed animals were sometimes seen as intelligent, but their identity as 'food' took precedence. Even 'wild' animals were viewed through this lens, described as vital to ecosystem balance — respected, but primarily for the role they play in human and planetary survival.

> *"...every species has a function and a reason it's here on the planet, and actually one of the few that was bred for food is pigs, unfortunately. Pigs don't have any other function."* Non-AC participant
>
> *"If there were no bumblebees in this world, then that would really damage part of the ecosystem and a lot of things would break down and it would affect us humans."*
> AC participant

## Speciesism messages:

Participants were unfamiliar with the term and often struggled to grasp it. Some responded defensively, especially when it was compared to racism or sexism, pulling them further from an animal-inclusive mindset.

## Environmental messages:

Promoting respect for nature sometimes supported ideas of respectful separation between humans and other animals, but also reinforced human dominance and purpose-driven thinking. Conservation was typically framed around species-level protection to sustain ecosystems for human benefit, ignoring the intrinsic worth of individual animals' lives.

## Animal companion comparison messages:

Comparing animal companions to farmed animals did not support mindsets progress in either group. In Non-ACs, it prompted confusion and unrealistic scenarios. For ACs, the comparison reinforced human-centred thinking, as these relationships were often framed around ownership, vulnerability, and control. Rather than encouraging an animal freedom mindset, it shifted the focus to high welfare, replacing the 'responsible pet owner' with the 'kind farmer'.

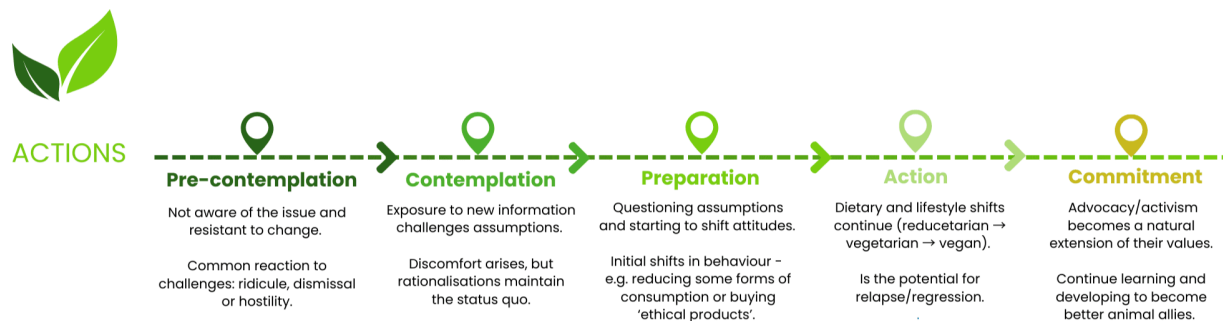> *"I would not be walking a pig down the street."*
> Non-AC participant

# Messaging Recommendations

- **Affirm positive values** without threatening identity; introduce new narratives that encourage reflection on systemic issues and alternatives to animal use.
- **Use trusted, relatable messengers** to gently present challenging ideas and highlight contradictions between beliefs and actions to spark productive cognitive dissonance.
- **Clearly communicate the unacceptability of the status quo**, emphasising other animals' suffering and the necessity for change, especially for Non-AC audiences.
- **Leverage the social progress narrative** to normalise animal freedom as part of society's ongoing evolution toward fairness and kindness.
- **Use social proof** to show that many others are already engaged, making change feel inevitable and empowering.
- **Avoid narratives reinforcing human–animal separation,** such as direct comparisons to human discrimination or environmental messaging that may strengthen speciesist views.
- **Focus on shared experiences** by highlighting psychological harm and animal abilities to challenge human superiority and support mindset shifts.
- **Strategically use 'wild' animal comparisons** to illustrate the natural freedom other animals could experience beyond exploitative systems, connecting this with farmed and captive animals. This isn't just about farmed animals living in sanctuary – it's about reminding audiences that the ancestors of farmed animals do live freely in nature.
- **Approach animal companion comparisons with care,** acknowledging these relationships often involve human dominance. Encourage reflection on autonomy, consent, and best interests without alienating ACs.
- **Develop new narratives** envisioning freedom and co-existence for animals dependent on humans, addressing the gap especially relevant for stalled ACs in high-welfare mindsets.

# The Actions Journey

*Actions represent the behaviours people undertake in support of or opposition to animal freedom. This strand reflects how empathy and mindsets translate into real-world choices.*

ACTIONS

| Pre-contemplation | Contemplation | Preparation | Action | Commitment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Not aware of the issue and resistant to change. | Exposure to new information challenges assumptions. | Questioning assumptions and starting to shift attitudes. | Dietary and lifestyle shifts continue (reducetarian → vegetarian → vegan). | Advocacy/activism becomes a natural extension of their values. |
| Common reaction to challenges: ridicule, dismissal or hostility. | Discomfort arises, but rationalisations maintain the status quo. | Initial shifts in behaviour – e.g. reducing some forms of consumption or buying 'ethical products'. | Is the potential for relapse/regression. | Continue learning and developing to become better animal allies. |

## Differences Between Groups

**Animal Companion group (ACs):**

- Had progressed further on the actions journey regarding diet, with most in the *preparation* stage, focusing on reducing 'meat' consumption and choosing 'ethical' options.
- Identify as 'animal lovers' and 'good people', motivated to make ethical consumer choices.
- Also embrace an 'I am aware' identity, which reflects pride in being informed about other animal, human, and environmental issues, but also keeps participants focused on doing things 'the right way' within existing systems, rather than questioning those systems themselves.
- Greater awareness of systemic harms, motivated by ethical concerns and personal bonds with other animals.
- May accept natural and necessary narratives but often alongside welfare-focused beliefs, limiting systemic questioning.
- More likely to support farming reforms, particularly a ban on factory farming.

- More open to a gradual societal transition toward plant-based eating, despite some personal resistance.
- Often believe they are already 'doing their bit' by caring for their animal companions and adopting ethical consumer behaviours.
- This sense of contribution can lead to complacency or 'moral licensing', where they feel less motivated to pursue deeper systemic change or activism.
- Liked the idea of the UK being known as a nation of 'animal lovers' and felt that society should celebrate the progress made so far.
- They were more likely to criticise the status quo and support societal change, though their commitment often wavered when it challenged their own behaviours.
- Tone was apologetic and conflicted, with 'meat' consumption framed as unfortunate but necessary, culturally ingrained, and justified through 'ethical' choices like high-welfare labels.
- The 'nice' justification was rarely used.

*"...people should still be able to eat meat, but responsibly farmed meat and not factory farmed meat."* AC participant

*"That's why I do tend to buy meat and things that's RSPCA Assured."* AC participant

*"Yes, I eat meat, but I buy organically. Farmers around me, they kill (in want of a better word) only when they need to. The animals live on beautiful [farms], because obviously I live near them all. They live in grassland, the hens roam free, fish is line-caught."* AC participant

*"All of us answering these questions here are all animal lovers or have animals. There's going to be a lot of society that aren't animal lovers or don't have an interest in animals, and I don't know whether they would be so receptive to change of their own lifestyles... We're looking at it through our wonderful animal-loving eyes."* AC participant

*"We're certainly taking more than we give back from animals now than we've ever done."* AC participant

*"I think the successes that have happened should be celebrated... the banning of wild animals and circuses, the banning of fur farming and fox hunting and so on, they're all significant..."* AC participant

**Non-Animal Companion group (Non-ACs):**

- Made the least progress, with many in the *pre-contemplative* stage of the journey.
- Lower awareness, limited engagement, and greater reliance on justifications to reduce discomfort.
- Tone was confident and unapologetic, with 'meat' consumption strongly tied to identity, social belonging, and human dominance.
- More entrenched in natural and necessary justifications, reinforced by simplistic beliefs about human dominance and the 'food chain'.
- The 'nice' justification was more often used than with ACs.
- Primarily see themselves as consumers, reinforcing views of other animals as commodities and focusing on better purchasing rather than systemic change.
- 'Ignorance is bliss' is often adopted as a key barrier to progression.
- Are affected by the knowledge of Big Animal Ag misinformation but show strong resistance to a plant-based transition, asserting the necessity of 'meat' and viewing plant-based alternatives with scepticism.
- Typically engage less in actions supporting animal freedom, often due to emotional distance and limited connection with other animals.
- Their entrenched beliefs and justifications further reduce motivation to explore or adopt animal-friendly behaviours.
- Tend to maintain habitual consumption without exploring alternatives.
- Favours human control.
- Uninformed about most issues and thinks less about improving animal rights.
- Were most likely to dismiss the idea of animal freedom.

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*"I'm a hard and fast meat-eater, so give me a good steak, I'm going to demolish it... I don't feel hypocritical, because that's my position. I choose to eat meat... I actually find it quite pleasurable to do so."* Non-AC participant

*"I don't think it's just the industry... me personally, I'm to blame as well. I don't really want to know."* Non-AC participant

*"... maybe I should go and live like the Dalai Lama?... would I have to go to jail for swatting a fly?"* Non-AC participant

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## Barriers to action

- **ACs:** Often influenced by the 'high welfare' myth, nostalgic views of small-scale farming, and narratives that farmers are caring custodians under pressure.
- **Non-ACs:** More strongly influenced by the 4Ns, especially natural and necessary justifications. Tended to maintain emotional distance and justify animal use as inevitable.
- **'Natural' and 'necessary' justifications are the strongest barriers to change,** framing behaviours as inevitable and essential, which discourages critical reflection and maintains the status quo. These beliefs link to ideas of human superiority and simplistic views of nature, such as humans as 'apex predators' or the 'food chain'.
- **Industry messaging,** including 'eat balanced' slogans and the 'high welfare' myth, reinforces these justifications by portraying animal products as essential and welfare-friendly. This reassures consumers—especially in the Animal Companion group—that they can care for farmed animals while continuing consumption, preserving their moral self-image and limiting broader advocacy.
- Identifying primarily as **consumers**, many participants see change as a lifestyle choice rather than a collective political or ethical issue. This consumer identity limits engagement with broader systemic change.
- Feelings of overwhelm, lack of knowledge, social stigma, convenience, and habit reinforce **inertia**, especially for those early on in the journey.
- **Welfare labels and certification schemes**, such as 'high welfare' or 'assured' products, often create a false sense of reassurance. This welfare-washing **undermines the urgency** to move beyond individual consumer choices to systemic changes.
- **Nostalgia** for an idealised past of small-scale, 'compassionate' farming led some, particularly in rural areas, to see a return to the past as the solution rather than imagining a future without farming animals.
- Views that **farmers** are not the villain but caring custodians under financial pressure (strongly held amongst ACs and rural participants) meant a transition to plant-based would harm farmers.
- The problem is viewed as scale and over-consumption rather than farming itself, and **cruelty is attributed to a few 'bad apples'**.
- **Environmental messaging** nudges 'meat' reduction, allowing ACs to maintain a 'good person' identity without deeper moral reflection on systemic problems.

> *"We have a farmer down the road... They [the cows] actually have the best facilities, the best food in winter... When he does take them to market, it's as kindly done as he can possibly do it. I hate the fact that he has to do it, but that is his business."*
> AC participant
>
> *"People don't have to switch to a plant-based diet, but just reduce [eating 'meat']... I don't eat meat, but I have leather shoes, leather sandals, boots and the sofa, and I drink milk and yoghurt..."* AC participant

## Drivers of action

- **ACs:** Motivated by recognising harms of factory farming and concerns about greed and profit, leading to early lifestyle shifts such as choosing 'high welfare' products.
- **Non-ACs:** Less aware of factory farming issues, often using outdated terms like 'battery farming'; nonetheless, messages about health benefits of plant-based eating can encourage some dietary shifts.
- Messaging that reinforces a **'good person' identity** helps keep people open and receptive to further change without triggering defensiveness or guilt.
- Introducing the idea of an **empowered citizen identity** shifts focus from individual consumption to collective action. This includes participation in boycotts, supporting policy reforms, or joining campaigns that challenge exploitative systems.
- **Social proof** is powerful: showing that many others are already acting helps normalise engagement and reduces fear of standing out or social isolation. Community belonging and collective identity provide motivation.
- The message that **eating more plants is healthy** has driven dietary shifts in both groups. As plant intake increases, the perceived sacrifice of reducing meat lessens, helping to ease loss aversion.

> *"I feel that the benefits of what meat gives, in terms of both protein and stuff, that I feel should still be available and it should be my choice. But I have to look at more healthier options to have a better lifestyle. So, maybe just looking at incorporating more vegetables, more plant stuff in there."* Non-AC participant

## Views on 'wild' animals

- **Both groups** had largely stopped visiting zoos, motivated by a concern for other animals' psychological wellbeing, leading to the belief that zoos are *unnecessary*.
- However, 'high welfare' arguments were used to justify some, like safari parks or 'conservation'-focused zoos.
- **Both groups** saw protecting 'wildlife' as a societal duty.
- **ACs** took more personal action with local 'wildlife'.
- Some **Non-ACs**, especially in urban areas, labelled them as 'vermin'.

> *"We have foxes and we have badgers that come into our paddock... I won't let anybody come in and kill them, get rid of them or harm them in any way, because they have just as much right to live in their environment. And I keep my eye open to make sure the badgers are safe, because if they're not safe, then I ring up the badger sanctuary that we have nearby and they can come and have a look at them for us."* AC participant

> *"The last zoo that we went to had a tiger there, a big, glorious animal. I just watched it walk backward and forward... It made me realise the zoo's got it there for our pleasure... but actually, it's suffering."* Non-AC participant

## Views on testing on animals

- **Both groups** broadly agreed that cosmetic testing on animals is unnecessary, but few reported actively seeking cruelty-free products.
- **Both** showed little awareness that testing on animals extends beyond cosmetics

to other products (toiletries, household cleaning products etc.)
- **Both** accepted testing on animals for medical purposes if done 'properly', though **ACs** showed more conflict and greater openness to alternatives.

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*"I think it has to be tested on animals... a human life is probably more important than an animal's life. But at the same time, there are laws and ways to go around things."*
Non-AC participant

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## Views on animal companions

- **Non-ACs** often prioritised human needs and roles (e.g. 'assistance' dogs) over other animals' interests, reflecting a human-dominated mindset.
- **ACs** were mostly at early stages of taking action, having 'bought' rather than adopted their animal companions.
- **ACs** justified this using 'nice' reasoning (preference for specific breeds), 'high welfare' beliefs (responsible breeding), and perceived barriers to adoption.
- **ACs** showed strong support for changing the legal status of animal companions (from property to recognising sentience), but often wavered when realised it could extend to animals farmed for food and impact their eating habits.

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*"...maybe we could just consider looking at animals in the scope of crime... Because if you try and do a blank canvas sort of thing against all animals, then do we not eat them?"* AC participant (when discussing potential legal reforms concerning the classification of animal companions as property)

*"I would always adopt. No problem at all... Basically, I haven't been able to find a dog which was of the breed... I'm passionate about."* AC participant

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# Messaging Recommendations

- **Provide clear, achievable next steps** tailored to individuals' journey stage, such as choosing plant-based meals, supporting campaigns, or sharing information, to maintain momentum and avoid overwhelm.
- **Emphasise systemic problems rather than individual blame**, framing exploitation as urgent and collective.
- **Recognise the messenger's role** in resonating with people at different stages and making change feel achievable.
- **Use trusted, relatable voices** – animal carers, activists, familiar figures – to encourage action and model achievable change.
- **Maintain the 'good person' identity** to keep people open to reflection and change.
- **Offer a new *aspirational identity*** – move beyond the consumer identity and help people see themselves as empowered *citizens*, shifting focus from lifestyle tweaks to collective action that challenges harmful systems and boycotts exploitative industries.
- **Leverage a social progress narrative** that affirms positive societal shifts and ongoing progress.
- **Show social proof** to normalise change and motivate continued action.
- Offer a new aspirational identity as empowered citizens focused on collective action beyond consumer choices.
- **Use storytelling to bring the citizen identity to life**, affirm progress, map future steps, and link personal change to systemic progress.
- **Challenge harmful narratives** through a combination of social progress, social proof, citizen identity, and storytelling.
- **Leverage connection with animal companions** to embed other animals' best interests into daily life and highlight how far other animals are from having theirs met.