

Meet the startup solving the pet-friendly rental problem

Lockdown created a huge demand for pets. As home ownership falls and renting grows year on year, it's becoming increasingly harder for pet owners to find pet-friendly, long-term rentals. We spoke to Natasha Homer-Earley, founder of PetsScore to discover how her startup is working to fix the problem for pets and owners alike.

Can you tell us a little about your own professional background?

I've been in tech since the start of the internet. First pioneering early eCommerce, then building out the mobile content industry. Then pioneering new monetisation models & payment types, which laid the foundations for what has now become FinTech, as well as cryptocurrency. I've held 8 CXO roles, advised tech accelerators and unicorns around the world.

I've been in tech so long I remember when Facebook opened Marketplace and I took the first wallet solution into it, so most of the games had the ability to monetise for the first time. We're talking about the early days of Zynga, King

etc. I launched the first fintech into Silicon Roundabout, paysafecard and I've worked on decentralised startups that have built their own Blockchains and low orbiting satellite networks with the help of SpaceX.

As well as my deep technology expertise, I've been a landlord in London. My family has owned a lettings agency and property development business.

What inspired the launch of PetsScore and what is your ultimate goal?

I'd just spent 6 months trying to find a new place to rent in the UK with my Jack Russell, Daisy. It was so hard! At one point, I began looking at renting static caravans, buying a caravan or even living in a tent, just to stay with Daisy. It quickly became clear I wasn't the only person going through this. Social media is flooded with stories of people struggling to find pet friendly rentals. I tried to find online tools to help but just came across sites directing me to gather paper references. I knew there had to be a better way. It was clear that creating pet references digitally was a no-brainer but the more I dug into different landlord concerns the more I realised I could address a much broader spectrum of their concerns, using the same tool.

Can you explain how the technology and risk scoring works in practice?

If you're looking to find a rental property that will allow you to have a pet, you create a Pet Profile, by answering a range of questions about your lifestyle, for example, your pet's behaviour, breed, age and immunisation status. This then ties up with our proprietary algorithm behind the scenes, which collates all the data points. This Pet Profile can then be pushed out to referees, such as your previous lettings agency, who then fills out a simple 12-question online form. These answers of course carry a weighting that is taken into consideration by the algorithm when determining a score. All the data is analysed against our risk model, and a PetsScore is then created. Much like a credit score, a PetsScore is a set of data which updates whenever new information is available.

With the right score, do you think letting

agents will be more accommodating towards tenants with pets?

When we designed PetsScore, we did it in collaboration with local letting agents. So their requirements and their feedback is completely at the heart of the MVP from launch. Even down to the payment models and payment methods we have designed. A PetsScore is a lot more than just a single risk score. A PetsScore report drills down into a massive amount of data about how a pet owner performs with their pet. We firmly believe that letting agents will accommodate more tenants with pets, based on the level of data they get in a PetsScore. We have already had signups from lettings agents and we've had letting agents state on social media commit to using PetsScore.

How are you partnering with landlords, letting agents and hosts to encourage those who might be hesitant?

There are a number of things PetsScore does, to reassure any lettings Industry professional nervous of using PetsScore. We only allow Lettings Industry professionals to give references; a pet owner cannot invite their family or friends to reference their pet. In order to provide a reference, first the Lettings professional must submit which industry association they belong to and their membership number. This means nervous landlords, agents or hosts can trust that the PetsScore is built on honest feedback from inside their trusted network.

We don't share completed references back with the pet owner. We treat all references with confidentiality. This way a landlord, agent or host can feel confident they can be honest in the reference form, without any undue pressure or influence from a pet owner.

We don't share the pet's total PetsScore with the pet owner. If we did, some pet owners would try to edit their pet's profile, to falsely boost their score. Then the lettings industry would not trust this and that defeats the purpose of building a solution to fix the problem for both pet owners and landlords.

What is the relationship between

PetsScore and more demand for pets in the last year?

PetsScore is underpinned by two key drivers. Firstly, globally the numbers of people renting grows every year, as it gets tougher each year to get a mortgage and home ownership becomes less common. Secondly, pet ownership grows every year as fewer people are able to buy their own property, they delay big life decisions like having kids and instead opt to become pet parents. Lockdown created a huge demand for pets, as people became cut off from their normal support networks. In the UK alone 3.2M new pets were purchased. As people experience the incredible life enhancing benefits of a pet, they won't want to give that up.

However, millions of these pets have gone into properties where the tenancy doesn't legally give them permission to do so, leaving them as pet owners exposed to an unhappy landlord, if they were to find out, and landlords exposed to potential damage and noise nuisance caused by an animal they don't know about.

PetsScore has the potential to be a massively powerful tool for renters wanting to convince their landlord that they can stay in the property with their pet by addressing the trust gap that unfortunately exists all too often on both sides of the tenant-landlord relationship.

What are the risks to some animals as owners behind to go back to work and move around again?

If landlords don't accept pets onboarded during lockdown this means there will be formal evictions or tenants having to move at very short notice. These tenants, new to pet owning, are suddenly going to become aware of the massive shortage of pet friendly rentals out there.

And that is going to increase the need for PetsScore as pet owners compete against each other to secure pet friendly rentals. To put some numbers around how bad the supply and demand for pet friendly rentals is, in the United States, there were 78M renters with pets before lockdown and only 11M pet friendly rental units.

We also think as people return to the office, looking after a pet will become unsustainable. So whether it's eviction, unable to find pet friendly housing or returning to the office, more pets will be left at animal shelters. We are already

seeing many rescue centres full in some parts of the world because of this. These shelters have to make very tough decisions about which pets will be put to sleep in order to create more room for abandoned animals. This is because a lack of pet friendly rentals means a shortage of places pets in shelters can be re-homed.

It's not a question of hoping PetsScore works. It has to work, otherwise more animals will die. More families will get ripped apart.

In the UK, Lincoln University did a study and found pets could save the NHS £2.5B a year in reduced GP visits due to the positive impact on mental health that can be achieved through pet ownership. This stat gives a glimpse not only of the impact on mental health, of people having to give up pets but the cost savings to our society as a whole, from keeping more people with their pets.

Do you have any tips for new and aspiring founders?

Be authentic. Innovate a startup about a problem that has directly impacted you, so you know first hand and care deeply about the challenge you are working to address. Do a no-code build; you'll save 70% on your build costs and get to market 300% faster. Finally, don't confuse funding as startup income. These are two different things.

What challenges do you think are unique to you as a female founder?

I can only access 2.8% of all VC investment money worldwide. The other 79.2% of that money goes to male founders. That's how debilitating it is to female entrepreneurs, to only have access to such a small share of the Venture Capital pot.

What's next for PetsScore?

Post-launch, you're going to see some deals announced. We are very keen to build some strong indirect channel partnerships. We have plans to scale globally very quickly. There are a lot of pet families out around the world that need us right now. We have a full roadmap of products in the pipeline and ambitions to develop further as a FinTech as well as PetTech business, so we have plenty to keep us busy.

