In the first research of its kind psychologists are taking a therapy dog into a UK court to assess whether they can be helpful to defendants and witnesses. Investigative Psychologist Dr Liz Spruin, and her trained therapy dog Poppy, are carrying out a pilot study in a Kent Magistrate’s Court.

Spruin and her research team, Katarina Mozova, Susanna Mitchell, Nicole Holt, Dr Anke Franz and Dr Ana Fernandez, were interested in the USA’s use of therapy dogs in courts. They contacted the country’s Courthouse Dogs Foundation and realised there was no research on the effectiveness of dogs in this context.

Each Friday Spruin, Poppy and her team have been walking around the defendants’ and witnesses’ waiting rooms and carrying out short interviews with those who engage with Poppy – a Jack Russell Shih Tzu cross – about what the experience was like. Spruin said Poppy hasn’t only been engaging with witnesses and defendants: ‘Sometimes we have translators engaging with Poppy, lawyers, and volunteers for victim services,’ she said.

In the next stage of the project Spruin will be following two case studies to assess whether Poppy can be useful to child victims from the moment victims’ services engage with them up until the time they come to give evidence in court. Eventually, Spruin said, she hopes to purchase a specially-trained dog from the Courthouse Dogs Foundation who may become the UKs first court-based therapy dog.

So far people have responded incredibly positively to Poppy’s presence in the court building, Spruin said: ‘I think I’m biased because Poppy’s my dog, so I was very optimistic at the start of the project. But honestly everyone who has engaged with her so far has given us really good feedback, especially the witnesses, they just love her. It’s amazing, especially with the witnesses you can see the difference Poppy makes. They’re really nervous before testifying then when Poppy comes and they stroke her their hands stop shaking, it’s great to see.’

Poppy may be a pet, but she is also a fully-trained therapy dog with a great deal of experience. Spruin said: ‘I’ve taken her to prisons and secure mental health units, hospitals and old people’s homes, she’s a very chilled dog and she’s certified so we thought she’d be great to bring in.’

Spruin truly believes in the power of therapy dogs and said: ‘They give people a feeling of security, especially for witnesses who often feel pretty emotional before they give evidence. Then even just holding a dog’s lead can give them a feeling of control. Research suggests just petting a dog leads to a greater sense of wellbeing a decrease in anxiety and heart rate, some evidence suggests it increases memory function as well, so might give mental clarity for witnesses.’

The team at Canterbury are happy to speak with anyone interested in collaborating on this project. If you would like to speak to them email Liz Spruin on liz.spruin@canterbury.ac.uk.