

CATS Report

**Cats and Their Stats
Northern Ireland 2023**



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Methodology

For the fourth year, we have commissioned an external and independent agency, Basis Research, to conduct the research contained in the CATS Report Northern Ireland 2023.

An online survey was used to collect information among a nationally representative audience of adults over the age of 18 in Northern Ireland and across the UK, allowing us to estimate the proportion of cat owners. We also conducted a more detailed survey among cat owners. This was carried out between 27 February 2023 and 13 April 2023. 'In the last 12 months' within the report refers to the time period March 2022 to March 2023 and unless otherwise stated, comparative data in this survey uses data from the CATS Report Northern Ireland 2022.

The research consisted of a UK nationally representative sample of 3,500 individuals and a boost of 6,829 cat owners, including regional boosts to ensure accurate representation in these areas. Overall, 10,392 people participated in the study, including 313 cat owners in Northern Ireland.

Data presentation

We work with Basis Research to calculate estimates of the cat population annually. Three data sources are used in this calculation:

- nationally representative online survey panel to determine the percentage of UK households who own a cat (n=3,500)
- data from the survey of cat owners on the number of cats owned by each household
- data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on the number of households

Percentages throughout the report are rounded to the nearest whole number. Other figures, such as the estimated number of cats in the population, are rounded to two significant figures. When calculating cat estimates, we have taken the total estimated cat population figure and multiplied it by the whole percentage, for example 10% of all cats are not registered with a vet, equating to 1.1 million cats. Statistics and population calculations are estimates based on owner-reported responses to the online survey. Significance testing is undertaken on the data at 99% and 95% confidence intervals. When a finding is referenced as significant within the report it has been found to be significant at a 95% confidence interval. Due to rounding, there will be instances in the report where percentage calculations do not total 100%.

Cat acquisition: Throughout this report we look at the recency of cat acquisition, typically looking at all those cats acquired in the last 12 months compared to another time period, for example over a year ago. The data is sourced from the question 'When did you acquire your cat?' in the CATS 2023 Research Survey.

Nationally representative sample: The population of interest is the entire population of the UK.

The nationally representative sample reflected its structure including gender, age, socio-economic groupings and regions.

More information available upon request.





Cats Protection is delighted to present the CATS Report Northern Ireland 2023 – the most comprehensive survey of cat owners in the Northern Ireland.

Understanding cat ownership is vital to understanding the lives of cats in Northern Ireland. The COVID-19 pandemic may be another year behind us, but the cost-of-living crisis continues, with many owners experiencing financial difficulties. The CATS Report Northern Ireland 2023 aims to inform and support those playing a key role in ensuring and promoting a good life for cats.

Cats remain an ever-popular pet and there is strong evidence of the great benefits of cat ownership, with an increased number citing companionship and reducing loneliness and stress as the reason they choose to own a cat. 21% of households own the 230,000 pet cats within Northern Ireland, and almost all of these consider their cat as part of their family.

We are also starting to see the cost-of-living crisis impact owners' ability to access veterinary care. This year more owners expressed concern about cost preventing them from visiting the vets. Challenges with veterinary capacity continues to be a considerable barrier to vet care access. Cats Protection is working with the veterinary profession to examine how it can support vets and owners in the face of these challenges.

After years of campaigning, Cats Protection welcomed the announcement that the compulsory microchipping of all owned cats will be introduced in England from June 2024. The CATS Report has found that over a quarter of cats in Northern Ireland still remain unchipped. Cats Protection is calling on the Northern Irish Government to introduce compulsory microchipping of pet cats in Northern Ireland.

Cats Protection is here to help people see the world through cats' eyes. We hope to help achieve this by deepening our understanding of cats and the people caring for them, and in turn improve the lives of all cats.

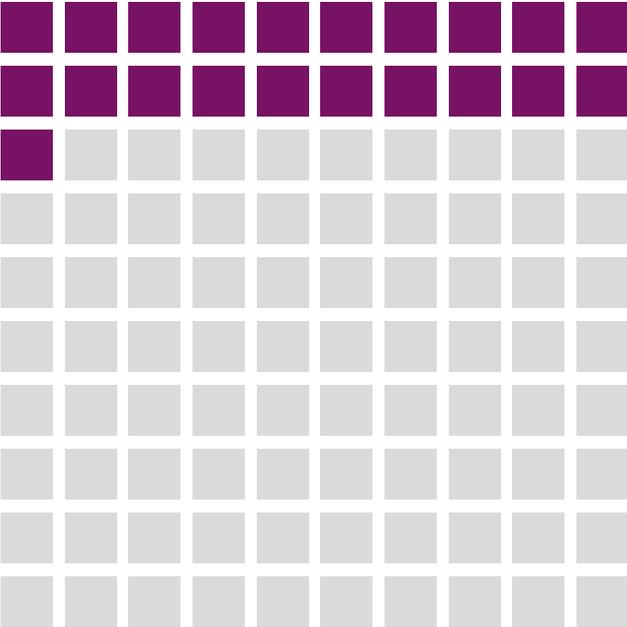
Kit Sturgess VetMB, PhD, DSAM, FRCVS
Chair of Trustees, Cats Protection



State of the nation

Cat population¹

21% of households in Northern Ireland own a cat



(26% in 2022)

There are now around

230,000 owned cats

in Northern Ireland.

The average number of cats per household has remained stable in Northern Ireland at 1.5 cats – in line with the UK as a whole. 63% of Northern Irish cat-owning households have one cat, and 37% own two or more cats, making multi-cat households more common in Northern Ireland, compared to the UK as a whole (UK: 33%).

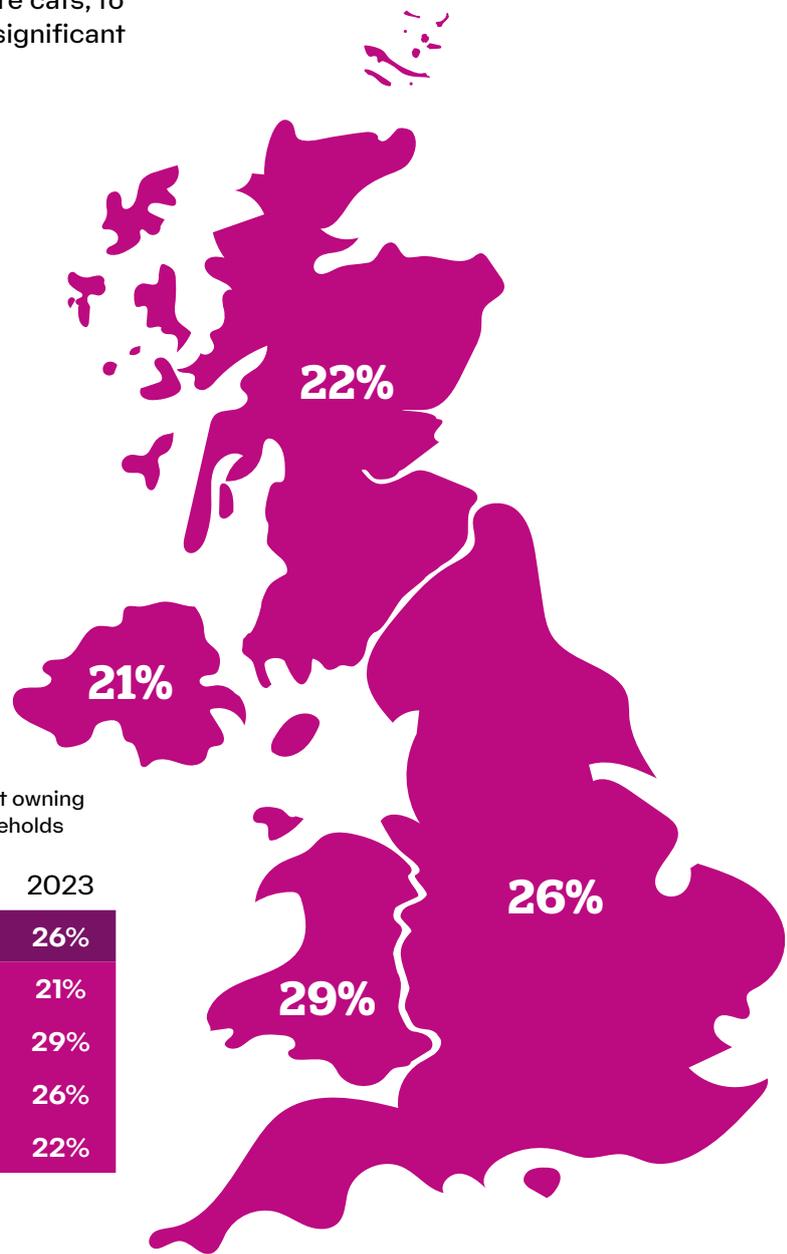
¹ Questions asked: Do you currently have a cat/s (that live with you)?/ How many cats do you have in your household?

Example calculation: 26% own a cat in the UK x 28.1m UK households* x 1.5 cats owned on average = 11 million cats owned across the UK.

*Source: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/datasets/familiesandhouseholds

Proportion of cat owners by UK country¹

Cat ownership levels vary across the UK, ranging from 21% of households in Northern Ireland owning one or more cats, to 29% of households in Wales, with no statistically significant changes from last year's figures.

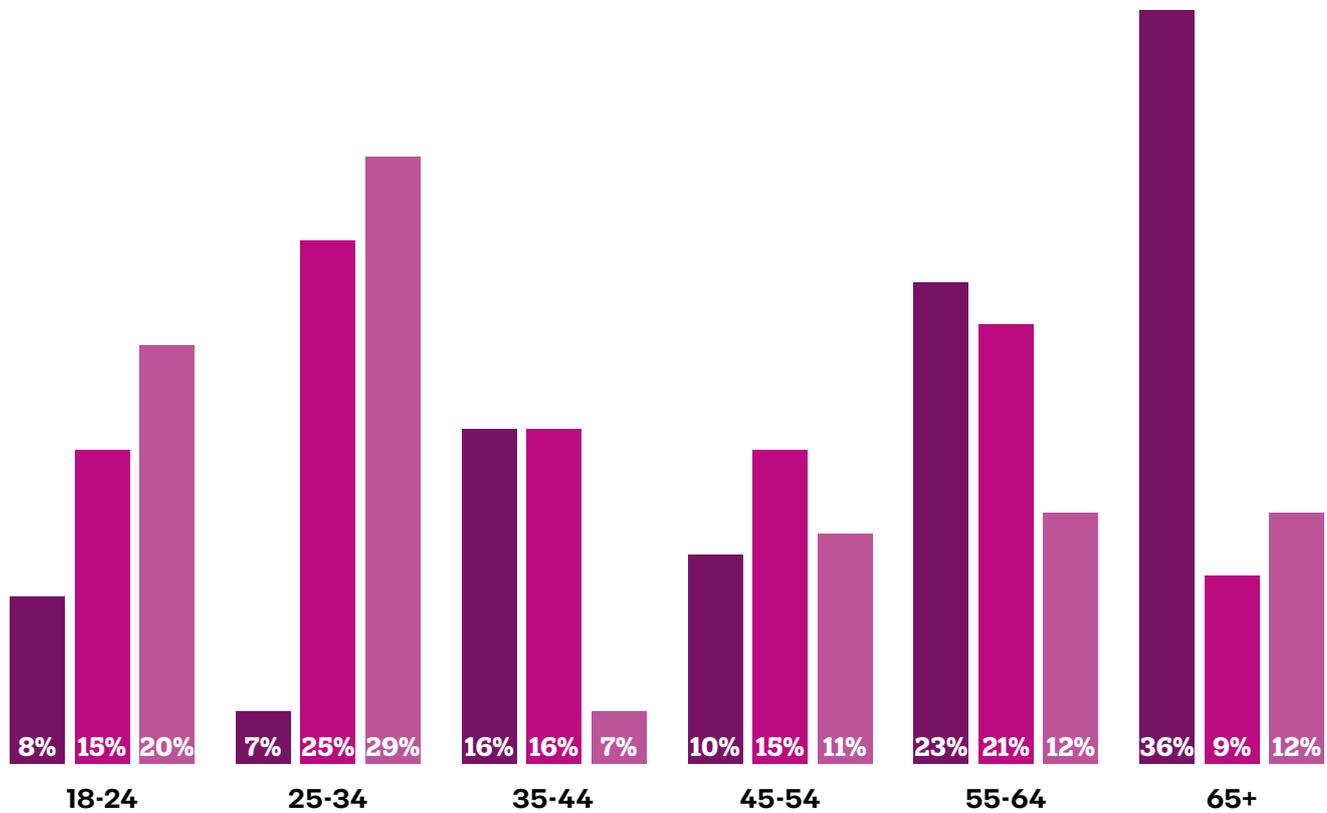


Owned cat population

	In millions		% of cat owning households	
	2022	2023	2022	2023
Total UK	11	11	26%	26%
Northern Ireland	0.3	0.2	26%	21%
Wales	0.6	0.6	28%	29%
England	9.2	9.2	26%	26%
Scotland	0.9	0.8	24%	22%

Profile of cat owners²

The age of Northern Irish cat owners compared to Northern Irish households



- Northern Irish adults
- All Northern Irish cat owners
- Northern Irish cat owners who acquired a cat in the last 12 months

Northern Irish cat owners are less likely to be over the age of 65 when compared to the general population and cat owners are more likely to be under the age of 35 in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK. Those acquiring a cat in the last 12 months in Northern Ireland also tend to be younger than the overall profile of Northern Irish cat owners.

² Questions asked: Do you currently have a cat/s (that live with you)?/How many cats do you have in your household?/When did you acquire (e.g. buy/adopt) your cat?

Northern Irish cat owners by age

18-34



35-54

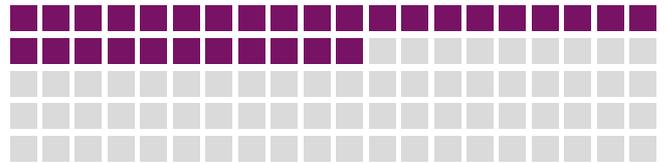


55+

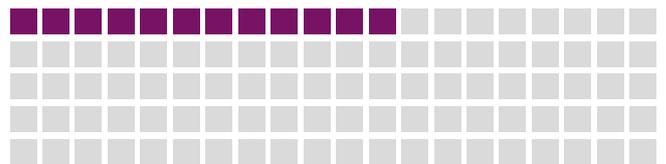


Gender and cat owners

31% of females in Northern Ireland own a cat



12% of males in Northern Ireland own a cat



The largest discrepancy between cat owner gender across the UK is seen in Northern Ireland, with females much more likely to own a cat than males.



The cat market

How cats were acquired (all cats in current Northern Irish cat population)³



18% of the current Northern Irish cat population were acquired during the last 12 months, equating to around 41,000 cats.

This equates to a current Northern Irish pet cat population where around:

90,000 were taken on or taken in*

48,000 were adopted from UK rescue/rehoming centres/animal shelters

41,000 were bought**

³ Questions asked: Where did you get/adopt your cat from?/ When did you acquire (e.g. buy/adopt) your cat? Excludes those who say they bought their cat but did not pay anything.

The remaining 17% of cats were acquired in one of the following ways: given as a gift, my cat adopted me (e.g. started coming in for food and stayed), from an individual I did not know offering them for free, other.

* Taken on from a neighbour/friend/family or found as a stray and taken in.

**Bought from a specialist breeder in the UK, bought from someone I know but not a specialist breeder, bought from a neighbour/friend/family, bought from a pet shop, bought from a specialist breeder overseas.

The UK-wide trend for people to buy, rather than adopt cats is not evident in the Northern Ireland cat population as a whole. Cats are much more likely to have been taken in from a family member or friend in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK. Uniquely across the UK, the proportion of adopted vs bought cats acquired in Northern Ireland in the last 12 months closely matches that of the overall general cat population. This suggests that there are no emerging trends to match the UK as a whole, and other devolved nations in Northern Ireland.

It is worth noting though that Northern Ireland is the only devolved nation in the UK not to regulate commercial third-party sale of puppies and kittens. This is something that many organisations are campaigning to change, which Cats Protection supports wholeheartedly.

What type of cats do people have?⁴

Percentage of cat breed types obtained in Northern Ireland, total pet cat population

Moggy/domestic shorthair or longhair

65%

Pedigree/purebred

22%

Don't know (non-moggy)

11%

Cross-breed

1%

Pedigree vs purebred

Purebred: a specific breed of cat produced through selective breeding, and both parents are of the same breed.

Cross-breed: A breed of cat produced through breeding with different breeds, for example two different purebreds or a purebred and a non-purebred/moggy cat.

Pedigree: A purebred or cross-breed cat that is registered with a governing body, and the ancestry is recorded.

Moggy: A breed of cat that is produced through nonselective breeding and is neither a purebred, nor a cross-breed.

In this report, pedigree and purebred cats are included in the description of 'pedigree', with purebred cats referred to as 'pedigree without paperwork', where relevant.

⁴ Questions asked: What breed is your cat?/When did you acquire (e.g. buy/adopt) your cat?

Veterinary care

Veterinary capacity⁵

There does seem to have been some easing of veterinary capacity problems since last year, although Northern Ireland already had the lowest veterinary accessibility problem of all the devolved nations anyway, according to the data.

22% of Northern Irish owners state that they have experienced difficulty accessing a vet (27% in 2022)

Top reasons that Northern Irish owners struggled to access a vet:

Vet too busy

9%

Reduced service delaying booking of surgery

7%

Vet has reduced opening hours

7%

⁵ Questions asked: Still thinking about the vet, have you experienced any of the following over the last 12 months in relation to your cat?/Which of the following best describes how often you tend to go to the vet?



Waiting longer for veterinary services such as neutering and vaccinations can increase the risk to the health and wellbeing of cats, reiterating the importance of early booking for non-urgent or routine treatments.

Recent insight work from Cats Protection probed deeper into current veterinary capacity concerns, finding that one of the top reasons that vets are struggling to meet demands is staff shortages. 40% of respondents to the survey of veterinary professionals said that they have, or had vacant posts remain unfilled for over six months⁶.

“In Cats Protection’s recent Veterinary Capacity Survey, over half of vets surveyed reported either a current or anticipated reduction in capacity, with both difficulties in recruitment and increases in pets registering over 2022 cited as contributing factors. Vets surveyed reported that this was impacting waiting lists for routine and elective surgery, difficulty fitting in emergency and urgent cases and challenges registering new clients.

“Access to veterinary care is fundamental to the work of charities like Cats Protection, and the veterinary workforce are instrumental in ensuring cat welfare. Cats Protection is currently looking at ways to support the veterinary profession during this challenging time.”

**Dr Alison Richards MRCVS,
Head of Clinical Services, Cats Protection**



Vet registration⁷

The proportion of cats in Northern Ireland who are registered with a vet has increased slightly from 88% in 2022 to 89%.

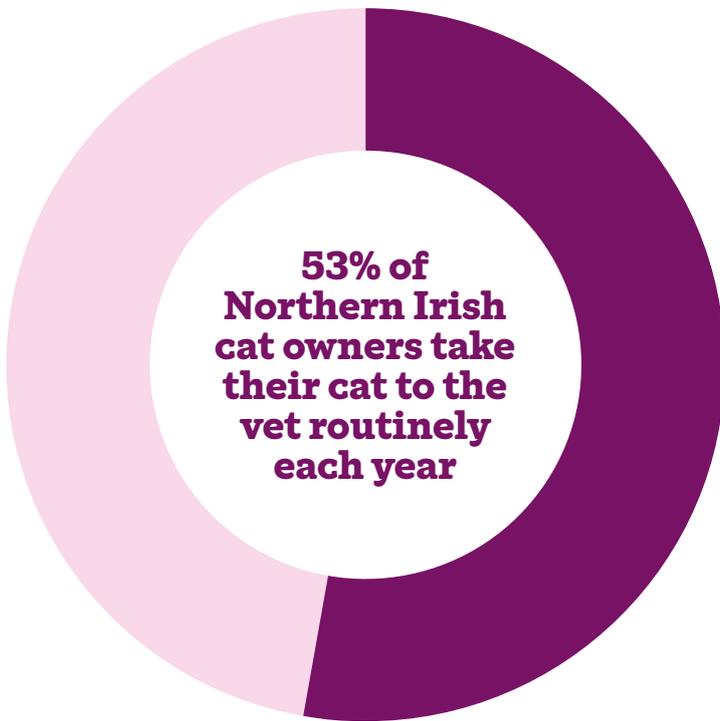
A large light purple circle containing a smaller dark purple circle. To the right of the dark purple circle is the text: **11% of cats in Northern Ireland are not registered with a vet**

11% of cats in Northern Ireland are not registered with a vet

⁶ Cats Protection’s Vet Capacity Survey Fieldwork: Nov 2022 to Jan 2023. Sample: 236 UK vet professionals including veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses asking about their experiences in the prior 12 months.

⁷ Question asked: Is your cat registered with a vet?

Vet visits⁸

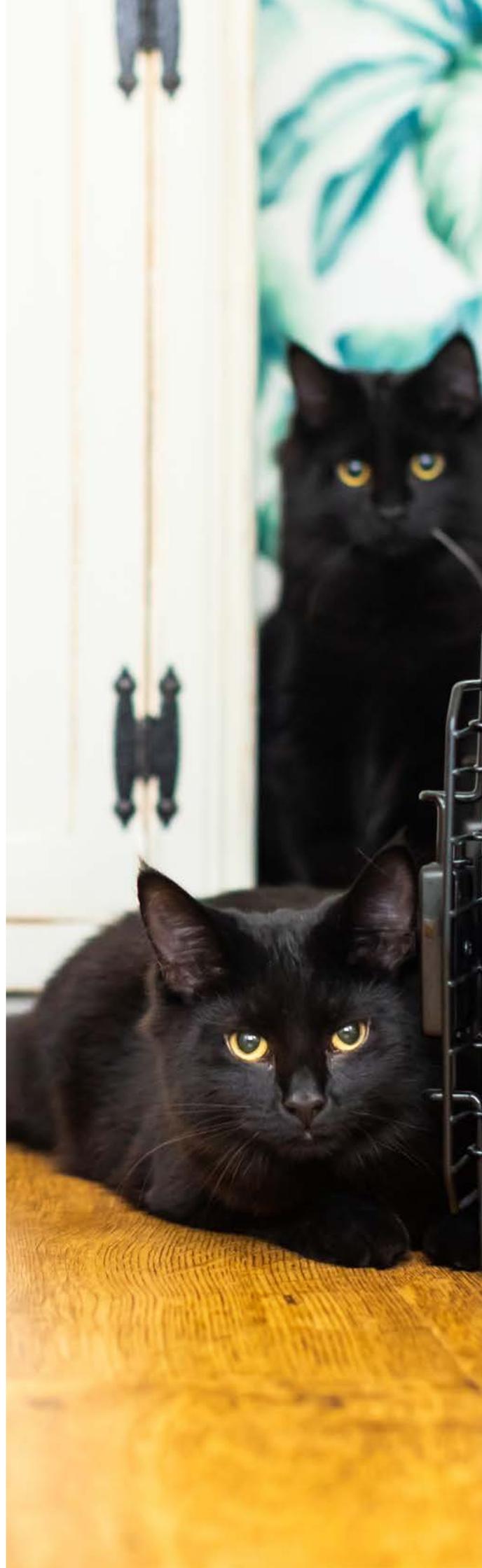


47% of cats in Northern Ireland do not routinely visit the vet each year, which is a higher proportion than all other devolved nations and the UK as a whole. This means that around 110,000 cats in Northern Ireland are not getting access to routine health checks.

Regular, routine visits not only ensure that cats receive preventative healthcare, but also provide opportunities for health problems to be detected before they are obvious to the owner. This facilitates earlier intervention, improving cat welfare and overall outcomes. Early intervention often represents a cost saving in the long run too, by helping to avoid the more extensive treatment required when some conditions are allowed to progress in severity.

For some Northern Irish cat owners though, irregular vet visits aren't necessarily by choice – 52% say that they do not visit the vet as often as they would like to, which is similar to last year (53%). The stress of vet visits (for the cat and their owner) remains a common barrier, but the cost of visiting the vet is increasingly the reason that Northern Irish owners don't go as often as they would like.

⁸ Question asked: Which of the following best describes how often you tend to go to the vet?





Top reasons for not visiting the vet as much as owner would like⁹

The cost

32%

(26% in 2022)

Too stressful for me/my cat*

27%

(24% in 2022)

With the rise of cat-only and accredited 'Cat Friendly' clinics, the figures for feline stress keeping cats from visiting the vet will hopefully continue to fall.

*net of responses related to these themes

“While it is well known that stress is a major factor affecting clinic visits, making small changes such as appropriate appointment booking and separation of cats and dogs in the waiting room helps reduce stress for both cats and their caregivers. Education of caregivers on cat carrier training and travel also plays an important role and helps reduce stressors prior to arrival at the clinic.”

Sarah Collins RVN, ISFM Nursing Manager, International Cat Care

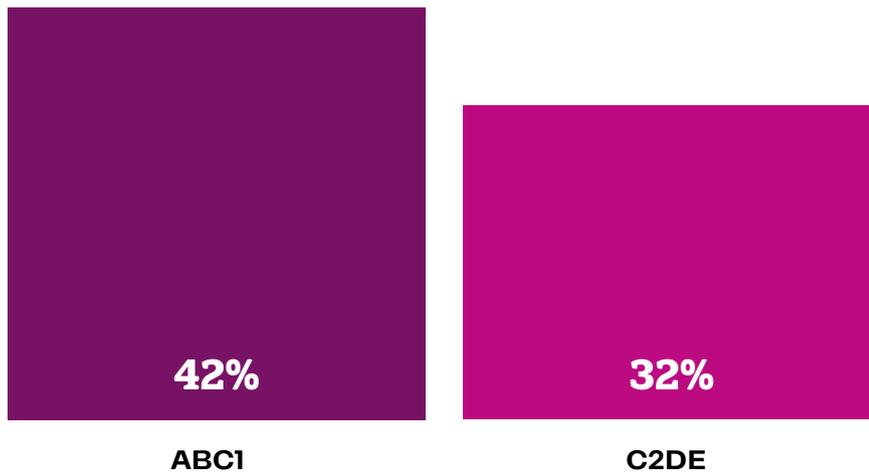


⁹ Question asked: Which of the following, if any, prevents you from taking your cat to the vet as often as you might like to?

Insurance¹⁰

37% of Northern Irish cat owners have taken out insurance for their cat, compared to 35% last year. While this increase is good, Northern Ireland still lags behind the UK as a whole, where 48% of cat owners have insured their cat.

Northern Irish owners who have taken out insurance for their cat, by socio-economic grade:



The likelihood of a cat being insured drops with the socio-economic grade of their owner, suggesting that affordability of insurance is a significant factor and likely excludes those that would benefit most from it, should a cat become unwell or get injured.

¹⁰ Question asked: Do you have pet insurance for your cat?

Vaccinations¹¹

It is important to stress that the data below is owner reported; owners may not be aware of which vaccinations are needed and with what frequency, but nonetheless the data provides a useful insight into the perceptions of owners.

Vaccination status of Northern Irish cats, according to their owners



The proportion of Northern Irish owners saying that their cat's vaccinations are up to date, appropriate for their age has decreased from 72% in 2022 – meaning that Northern Ireland has the lowest vaccination rate of all the devolved nations and the UK as a whole. This translates to 76,000 cats in Northern Ireland that may not be protected against diseases that are preventable by vaccination.

¹¹ Question asked: Is your cat up to date with their vaccinations (i.e. has had their booster vaccinations as relevant to their age)?

Parasite treatments¹²

56% of Northern Irish cat owners say that they are protecting their cats against fleas, and 51% against worms, throughout the year as often as is recommended by their vet or the product that they use. This is a decrease on last year's figures (61% for fleas and 59% for worms).

Flea treatment

16% of Northern Irish cat owners only apply flea treatment to their cat when fleas are present. There can be negative implications of this approach though. Signs of fleas are often the result of cats being irritated by bites and fleas can transmit diseases such as Bartonella and tapeworms. There is also usually a significant environmental burden of immature flea life stages once fleas are established within the home.

However, cats with certain lifestyles will be at a much lower risk of being exposed to fleas. Therefore, each cat should be evaluated on a risk-benefit basis as to the frequency of treatment, and vets should educate owners about the best treatment protocol.

Worming treatment

21% of Northern Irish owners only treat their cat for worms when they think that worms are present, which is concerning, as many cats show no outward signs of worms when infected yet will be shedding infective eggs into the environment via their faeces. Some species of worm eggs, such as *Toxocara cati*, can infect humans, with the risk of potentially serious disease for young children, the elderly and those who are immunocompromised.

Lifestyle and diet both influence a cat's risk of being infected with worms and treatment frequency based on these factors, rather than looking for signs of worms (unless performing worm egg counts), is advisable.

Responsible parasite protection

There is increasing concern that some of the parasiticides commonly used for pets may be contaminating the environment. As parasiticides are harmful to a wide range of invertebrates, and with even small doses potentially impacting large numbers, this could be highly detrimental to wildlife and ecosystems and, in turn, public health.

Protecting our pets against the harmful effects of parasites is important though, so an 'individual risk' approach is recommended, guided by evidence-based expert bodies, such as the European Scientific Counsel for Companion Animal Parasites (ESCCAP).

www.esccapuk.org.uk/guidelines-uk/



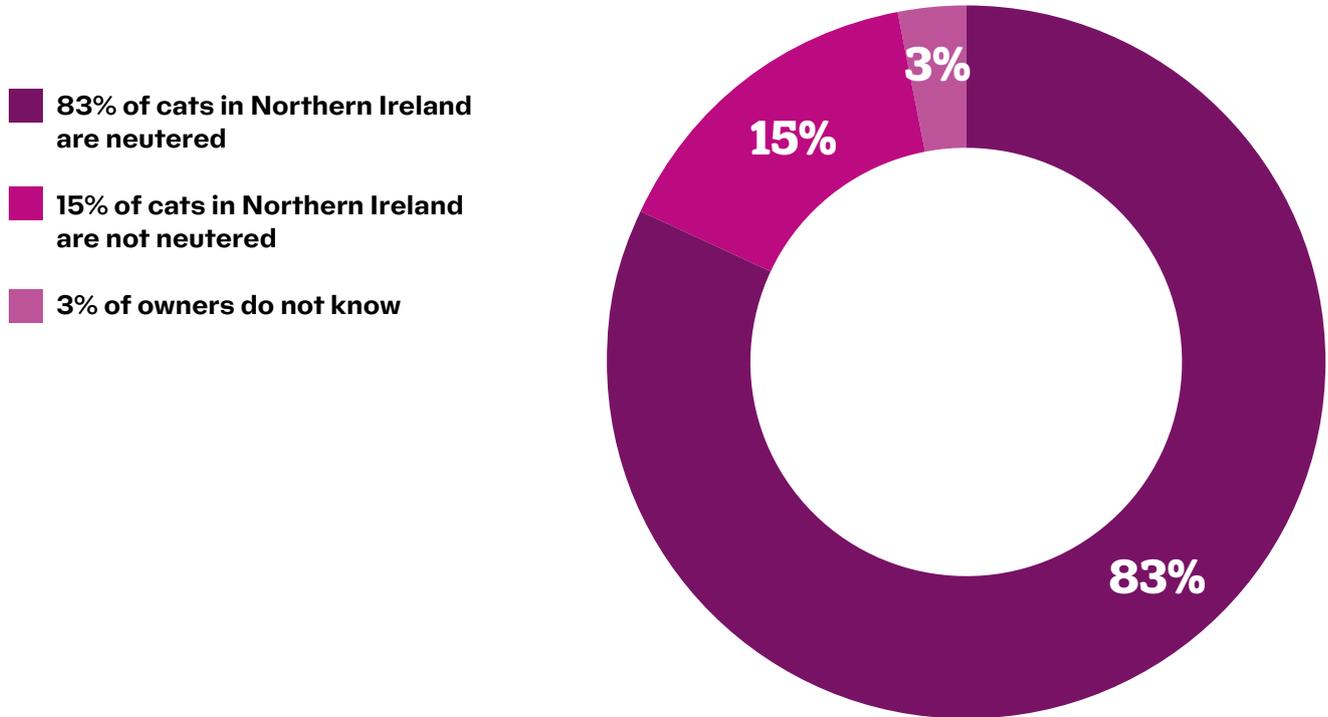
“Veterinary professionals should always take a risk-based approach to prescribing medicines, including parasiticides. They should avoid blanket treatment, and instead risk assess use of parasiticides for individual animals, taking into account animal, human and environmental health risks, in addition to lifestyle factors.”

**‘Responsible use of parasiticides for cats and dogs’ policy,
British Veterinary Association**

¹² Questions asked: How often do you tend to protect your cat from fleas?/How often do you tend to give your cat a worming treatment?

Neutering and breeding¹³

The proportion of neutered cats in Northern Ireland has increased slightly from last year (82%) but remains lower than the other devolved nations and the UK as a whole.



The Northern Irish cats less likely to have been neutered

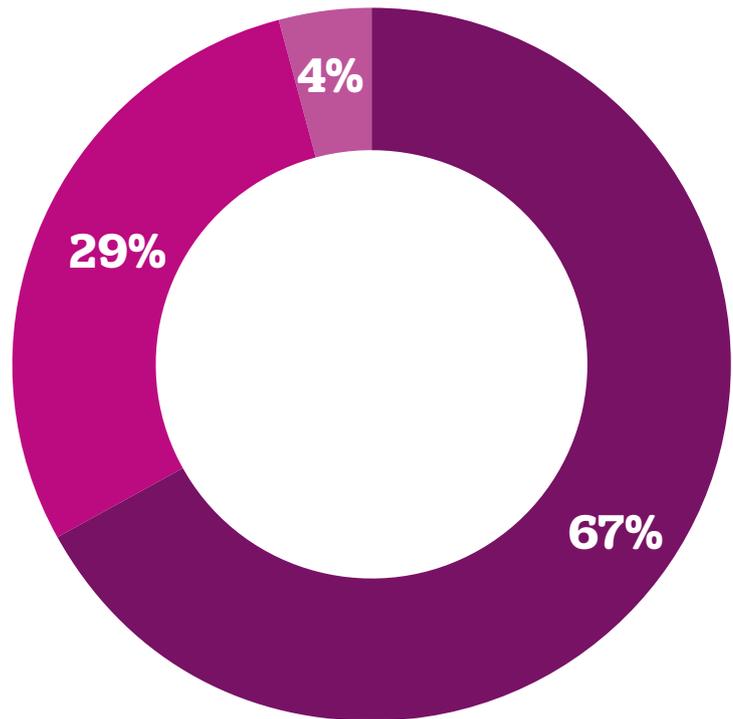
Younger cat owners aged 18-34 are less likely to have neutered their cat (75%), compared to 91% of 35-54 year olds and 88% of those aged over 55. Indoor cats are also less likely to be neutered (79%) than those who have outdoor access (86%).

¹³ Question asked: Is your cat neutered/spayed?

Microchipping¹⁴

Microchipped cats in Northern Ireland

- 67% are microchipped
- 29% are not microchipped
- 4%, the owners are unsure if their cat is microchipped or not



There has been an increase in the number of microchipped cats in Northern Ireland, from 60% in 2022. However, this proportion is still the lowest across all the devolved nations and the UK as a whole. **In total, around 76,000 cats are potentially without a microchip in Northern Ireland**, reducing their chances of reunification with their owners, should they get lost or stolen.

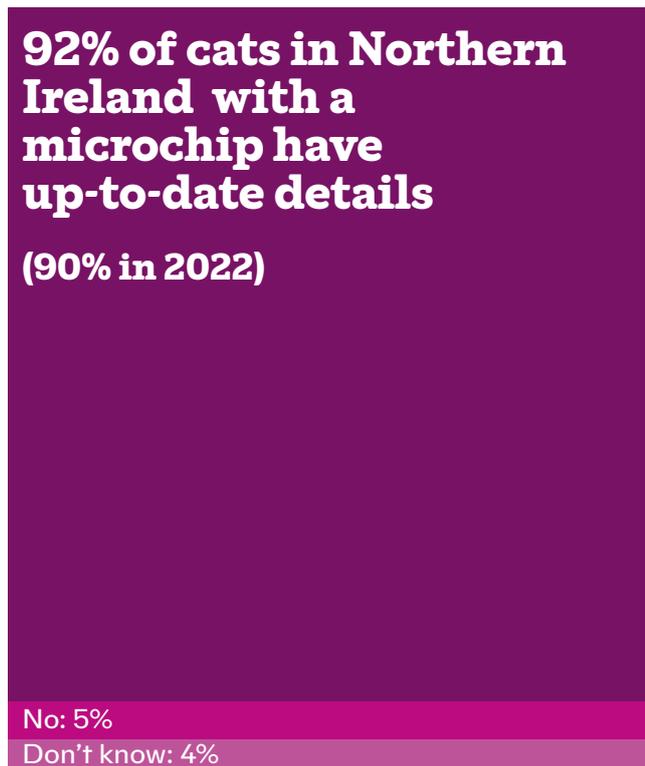
The cats less likely to be microchipped

Cats of first-time owners in Northern Ireland are less likely to be microchipped (55%). There is also a significant difference between the microchipping rates of cats acquired in Northern Ireland during the last year (57%) and those acquired over a year ago (69%).

Indoor cats are also arguably at greater risk of becoming lost, should they find themselves outside in unfamiliar surroundings, so it is concerning that 'my cat doesn't go outside' is the top reason that Northern Irish owners choose not to microchip their cat.

¹⁴ Question asked: Is your cat microchipped?

Microchips and keeping details up to date¹⁵



Of those who say their cat's microchip details are up to date:

85% say their **phone contact is up to date**

82% say their **current address is up to date**

70% say their **email address is up to date**

8% are **unsure which specific details are up to date**

Slightly more Northern Irish owners than last year say that their cat's microchip details are up to date, but this still leaves a proportion of cats who are microchipped with details that are out of date, potentially rendering their microchip useless, should they become separated from their family.

Introducing legislation that makes microchipping for cats compulsory is not something that the Northern Irish Government has committed to, as in England. This is something that Cats Protection will continue to campaign for, to protect the welfare of cats across the UK and all of its devolved nations.

“Although there has been a positive uptake in the number of cats microchipped, it is disappointing to see that Northern Ireland's cat microchipping rates remain the lowest in the UK for a fourth year running. When a cat is lost, injured or stolen the safest and easiest way of reuniting them with their owner is through a microchip. Over a quarter of cats remain unchipped, these cats are at risk of never being identified and returned to their owners if they are lost or stolen. The increase in the number of cats being microchipped in the last year could be attributed to the UK Government introducing compulsory microchipping of pet cats in England which has increased awareness of the benefits of microchipping with Northern Irish cat owners. Cats Protection is calling on the Northern Irish Government to also introduce regulations to make microchipping of pet cats compulsory in Northern Ireland.”

Madison Rogers, Head of Advocacy, Campaigns & Government Relations, Cats Protection



¹⁵ Questions asked: Are your cat's registered microchip details up to date?/Which of the following microchip details are up to date?

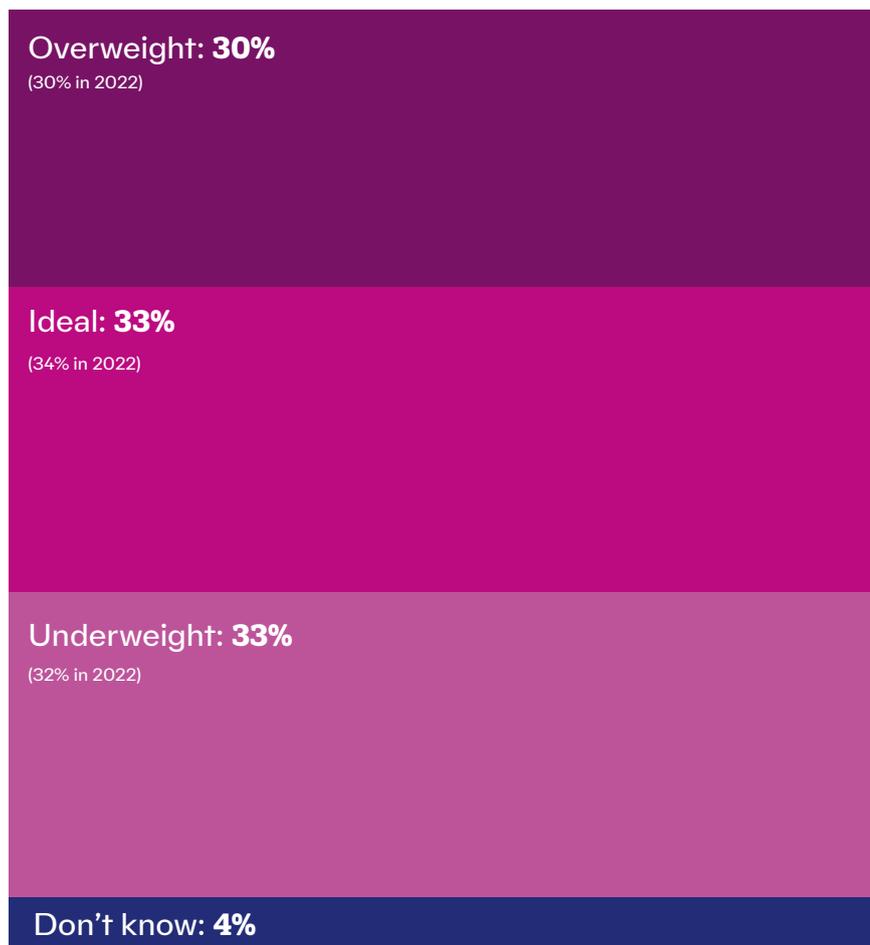
Health conditions and injury¹⁶

81% of cat owners state that their cat has no diagnosed health conditions, which is a slight decrease from last year (83%), but still higher than the UK average (77%).

32% of Northern Irish owners said that their cat had been injured since they have owned them – the highest rate of all the devolved nations and the UK as a whole. The most common reason for injury is fights with other cats outside the household (14% of all cats)¹⁷.

Diet and body weight¹⁸

Northern Irish owner perception of their cat's weight



When looking specifically at obesity, just 2% of Northern Irish owners placed their cat in the highest body condition score (8/9 and 9/9) brackets. It must be emphasised that this data is owner reported, however. Vet-reported figures for feline obesity are around 11.6%, but it is also noted that obesity may be under-reported in primary care vet practices¹⁹.

¹⁶ Question asked: Does your cat have any of the following diagnosed health issues/conditions?

¹⁷ Question asked: Since having your cat, has your cat ever been injured?

¹⁸ Question asked: Which of the following descriptions and images would you say best reflects your cat in relation to their size?

¹⁹ O'Neill DG, Church DB, McGreevy PD, Thomson PC, Brodbelt DC. Prevalence of disorders recorded in cats attending primary-care veterinary practices in England. *Vet J.* 2014;202(2):286-291. doi:10.1016/j.tvjl.2014.08.004.

Can't afford the vet?

Worryingly, the cost-of-living crisis seems to be impacting feline health and welfare by decreasing access to vital veterinary care for cats. Understandably, this is being felt more by those who have been impacted most by cost-of-living challenges, such as lower income households.

11% of Northern Irish cats are not registered with a vet⁷

13% for those in socioeconomic grade C2DE

52%

of Northern Irish owners in socioeconomic grade C2DE don't take their cat to the vet routinely each year (47% for all Northern Irish cat owners)⁸

32%

of Northern Irish owners said cost prevented them from visiting the vets as often as they would like (up from 26% in 2022)¹⁰

Overall, 29% of Northern Irish cat owners are concerned about how they would pay vet bills if their cat became sick or injured. This is more than the UK as a whole (25%)²⁰.

As more and more households are struggling to meet everyday costs, Cats Protection is looking at ways that it can support owners to access essential veterinary services. Cats Protection's subsidised neutering scheme will enable access to neutering and microchipping for cats where finance may be a barrier. Cats Protection also signposts to organisations who provide access to subsidised veterinary clinics for eligible owners. However, charity resources will be limited, and in the face of a cost-of-living crisis, it's likely that not all owners will be able to access a subsidised clinic.

Insights from a recent survey of the veterinary profession suggests that decision making for vets and clients is becoming more dependent on financial limitations since the cost-of-living crisis began. Cats Protection is developing education resources for vets to support them with clinical decision making and discussions around finances with owners who are struggling, so that they can offer a broader range of treatment options.

Education for current and potential owners to help them understand the realistic costs of veterinary care is also important, as it allows owners to budget for costs accordingly and highlights the benefits of having pet insurance. It will also help reassure and encourage attendance for some owners who perhaps perceive veterinary treatments as being more expensive than they really are.





To help ensure continued access to important veterinary services for all households, Cats Protection is dedicated to delivering targeted help for cat owners on a low income to overcome some of the barriers to veterinary access for neutering and microchipping.

It is vital that support is well signposted to Northern Irish owners however, as 63% say that they are unaware of support available to them, to help with the rising costs of looking after their cat and a further 14% say that they wouldn't know where to go to find it²¹.

This highlights the importance of well-coordinated communication teams for charitable and other support organisations.

“Cats Protection is proud to have launched a new subsidised neutering scheme for low-income households from April 2023. After surveying how best to make the scheme work for vets, we increased the value of the voucher (and will review this annually), have one, nationwide scheme, and include post operative pain relief, a buster collar and microchip where needed. In helping more cats be neutered (and chipped) we aim to reduce the number of unwanted litters, which are not only detrimental to feline welfare, but can place additional financial strain on those already most affected by the cost-of-living crisis. We thank all the practices who have already signed up for helping us work towards this.”

**Jane Clements RVN,
Head of Neutering, Cats Protection**



²¹ Question asked: Are you aware of any support available to help with rising costs of looking after your cat/s?

Cat care, welfare and behaviour

Sources of cat care information

The number of Northern Irish cat owners claiming to have done research prior to getting their cat has dropped from 32% last year to 23% this year. Northern Irish owners who claim to do a lot of research generally about how to best look after their cat has also dropped, from 33% last year to 29% this year²².

Where are Northern Irish people seeking their cat advice from?²³

Contact my vet:

65% (62% in 2022)

Search the internet/Google:

56% (50% in 2022)

Talk to my friends and family:

38% (32% in 2022)

Search social media:

19% (16% in 2022)

Contact an animal charity:

15% (9% in 2022)

Contact a pet shop:

11% (13% in 2022)

Buy or borrow a book:

11% (10% in 2022)

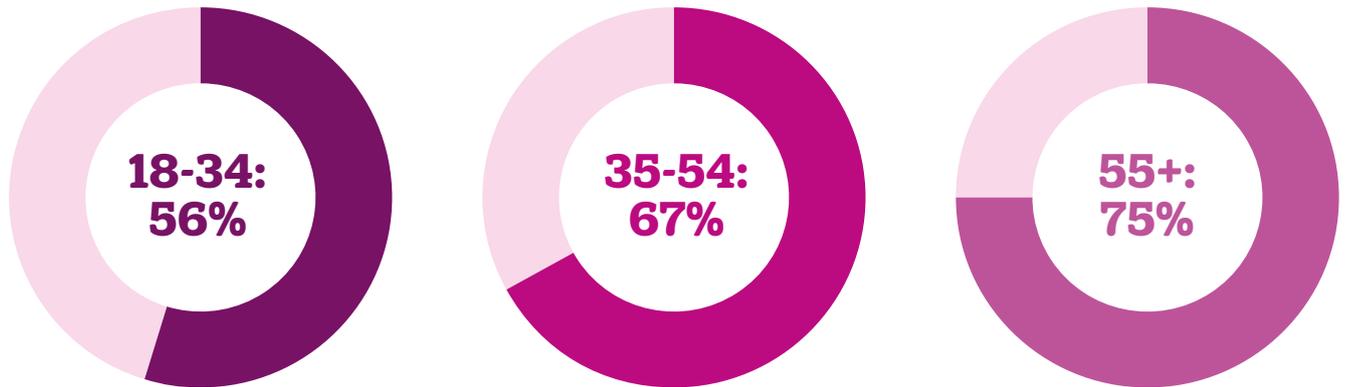
The vet remains the most commonly chosen source of advice for Northern Irish cat owners²³. This seems to translate into owners that feel better informed, as 63% of Northern Irish cat owners that visit the vet regularly feel confident that they know what is best for their cat, compared to just 56% of Northern Irish owners that never visit the vet²⁴.

²² Question asked: To what extent do you agree with the following statement (I did lots of research before getting my cats/I find it easy to find high quality and reliable information about cats)? Top two response boxes included (1 = strongly agree, 7 = strongly disagree).

²³ Question asked: Which of the following would you do if you were seeking information or advice about your cat/s?

²⁴ Question asked: I'm very confident I know what's best for my cat/s: To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements about having a cat/s?

Older Northern Irish cat owners are more likely to seek information about their cat from a vet²³

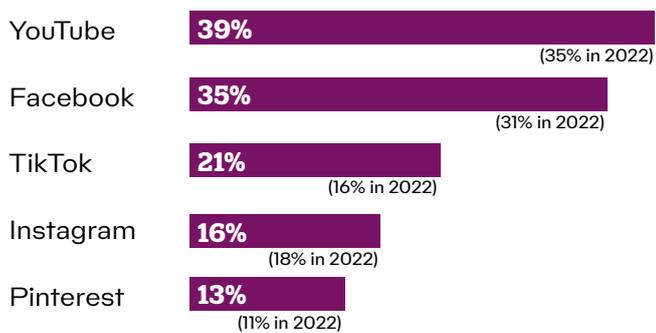


Contrary to all other devolved nations and the UK as a whole, Northern Irish owners that acquired their cat in the last 12 months are as likely to turn to their vet as a source of information about their cat. These new owners are more likely to seek out advice on social media than owners who acquired their cat over a year ago however (27% vs. 17%).



Internet searches and searches on social media for information on cats are increasingly popular for owners in Northern Ireland, further highlighting the online space as an increasingly important source of information²⁵.

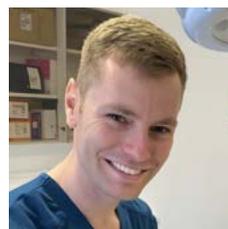
Social media platforms as sources of information about cats in Northern Ireland²⁵



YouTube remains the most popular source of cat information for Northern Irish cat owners on social media but the rival video-based platform, TikTok has seen a rise in popularity for this purpose over the last year.

“With more owners looking for information about their cats online, and especially among our younger owners, there is an important opportunity for vets to use these platforms to educate the public. Despite worrying trends towards cat content which focuses on extreme breeding and practices of poor welfare, vets can counteract this by challenging misinformation and providing factual, engaging, and valuable information which in turn empowers owners to do the best by their cat.”

**Dr Ben Simpson-Vernon MRCVS,
Veterinary surgeon and TikTok star
(Ben the Vet)**



²⁵ Question asked: Which of the following, if any, do you use/visit on a regular basis when looking for the following content related to cats? (Information/advice).

Cats Protection is increasingly concerned about the representation of cats online, as well as videos that people may think are ‘fun’ but are actually causing distress to cats. The charity is looking to work with companies which advertise online using cats to ensure they are not represented in a way that could be detrimental to their welfare and that extreme breeds are not used.



Top cat-related activities that Northern Irish owners engage in several times a week or more²⁶

Talk about cats with my friends/family:

46%

Watch funny or cute videos of cats online:

39%

Look at funny or cute pictures of cats online:

38%

Look at cat-related social media profiles:

25%

Overall, Facebook and YouTube remain the most popular social media sources of ‘fun’ cat-related content (FB: 42%, YT: 39%), but for younger Northern Irish owners aged 18-24, TikTok is by far the most popular social platform (61%, all Northern Irish cat owners: 34%)²⁷.

²⁶ Question asked: How often do you tend to do each of the following? Top two response boxes included (at least once a day, several times a week).

²⁷ Question asked: Which of the following, if any, do you use/visit on a regular basis when looking for the following content related to cats? (Fun content).

A cat's environment

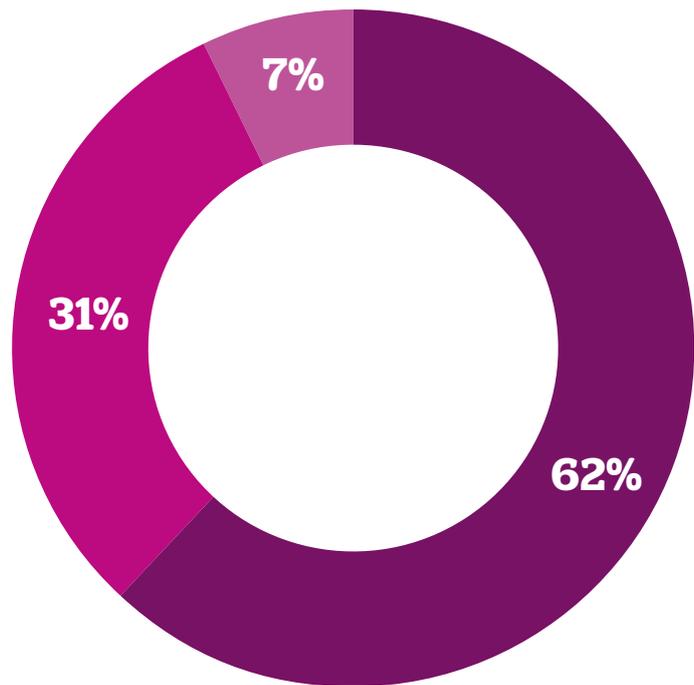
Indoor vs outdoor cats

Cat living arrangements²⁸

They go both indoors and outdoors: 62%
(64% in 2022)

They always stay indoors: 31%
(30% in 2022)

They always stay outdoors: 7%
(6% in 2022)



The total proportion of cats in Northern Ireland that have access to an outdoor space has remained largely the same (69%) and is higher than the UK as a whole (63%). Northern Ireland has one of the lowest proportions of indoor-only cats compared to the UK as a whole (37%) and all other devolved nations individually.

61% of Northern Irish cat owners control their cat's outdoor access in person – letting their cat in and out as needed. 9% use a cat flap with built in functionality that allows them (as the owner) to control their cat's access – either with a timer, or unidirectional opening. 16% have a basic cat flap, increasing the likelihood that their cat has autonomy over their outdoor access²⁹.

As well as controlled cat flaps, other measures that can help cats remain safer outside include making their outside space as enriching as possible and cat-proof fencing to discourage them straying too far (as well as unwanted visits from other cats) and training them to come when called. To facilitate rapid reunification should they get lost, microchipping is a must.

²⁸ Question asked: Which of the following best applies to your cat?

²⁹ Question asked: In what ways does your cat have access to going outside/ coming inside?

“To thrive, cats need to feel they have sufficient autonomy and choice with their environment, as well as access to positive sources of stimulation. This includes the opportunity to explore, perform elements of their predatory sequence and access somewhere calm, away from the typical daily activities and disturbances going on within the home. Giving cats the option to venture outdoors into a safe and enriching area is a good way to provide them with these pleasurable experiences and sense of autonomy, and it’s encouraging to see that the majority of cats reported on in the survey have outdoor access. Although there are always important risks associated with cats going outdoors, it is also really reassuring to note the very low reported incidence of injury due to road traffic accidents and other outdoor hazards.”



Dr Lauren Finka PhD, Feline Welfare Scientist, Cats Protection



“Daily enrichment; such as the use of a puzzle feeder or appropriate play can have multifactorial benefits for all cats, but especially indoor-only cats and cats in multi-cat households. These activities simultaneously help stimulate the cat both physically and mentally, while also contributing to the release of ‘feel good’ hormones. Providing activities that best meet the ethology of our domestic cats ensures that one of their key welfare needs are met. This can form part of a wider solution needed to strive for harmony in a multi-cat household. Additionally, the value of vertical space should not be underestimated. Cats being able to get up high and avoid each other when moving about is an invaluable resource.”



Daniel Warren-Cummings, Behaviour Officer, Cats Protection

Cats at night³⁰

For those Northern Irish cats that do have outdoor access, 35% are able to come and go freely at night – less than the UK as a whole (39%) – but over half (56%) of Northern Irish cat owners keep their cat in overnight.

Cats Protection recommends that cats are kept in overnight, to reduce the risk of injury from road accidents, fights with other cats/ animals and predation of wildlife. This is because cats are most active at dusk and dawn, choosing this time to hunt, explore and venture into other cats' territories.

Preventing cats from harm

32% of Northern Irish cats have been injured since being in their owner's care¹⁷. This is the highest rate of injury across all of the devolved nations.

57% of Northern Irish cat owners are unaware that lilies are toxic to cats, which is higher than the UK as a whole (53%) and represents a lot of Northern Irish cats that are potentially at risk³¹

Lily toxicity occurs when a cat eats any part of the lily plant, including pollen that ends up on their coat and the cat licks off while grooming. The toxins can cause kidney failure, which is often fatal. Ideally owners should totally restrict their cat's access to lilies but if lily toxicity should occur, prompt veterinary care should be sought, as rapid treatment can prevent renal failure.

³⁰ Question asked: Does your cat have access to the outside overnight?

³¹ Question asked: Which of the following popular cut flowers, if any, are you aware of being toxic to cats?

As well as ongoing media and social media activity, Cats Protection is calling on companies that sell lilies to improve warning labelling and has produced guides for cat owners about the dangers of lilies, and other plants, to cats.

Find out more: www.cats.org.uk/lilies



Living with other pets

Over a third (37%) of cat owning Northern Irish households have more than one cat, which is more than the UK as a whole (33%)³¹. 48% of Northern Irish cat owners also own a dog – more than the UK as a whole (39%)³².

Cats are not ‘social obligates’ like dogs and humans – they do not necessarily need to live with company to have their emotional needs met. Because of this, other pets (especially other cats) in the household can be a source of stress and so steps must be taken by owners to ensure that resource provision and placement is adequate for all cats in the household, as well as being aware of signs of stress in cats. A single cat or bonded pair of cats is almost always the best household set up to avoid social problems.

Best practice advice for multi-cat households is to ensure resource provision for cats at a minimum rate of ‘one per cat, plus one’. The figures for important resources such as water bowls and litter trays, show that this recommended resource ratio is less likely to be met in multi-cat households, where the need is greatest. This creates a potential welfare problem, increasing the risk of stressed cats and the potential for intra-household fighting – something that has been reported to lead to injury for 3% of all Northern Irish cats¹⁷.

Average number of resources per cat in Northern Ireland³³

				 +		
	2023	2022	2021	2023	2022	2021
Food bowls	2.4	2.6	2.1	3.5	3.5	3.5
Water bowls	2.2	2.3	1.9	2.8	2.7	3.0
Litter trays	1.7	1.8	1.5	2.3	1.9	2.2
Scratching post	1.8	2.0	1.7	2.4	1.9	2.6
Cat beds	2.1	2.4	1.8	3.1	2.8	3.0
Hiding places	2.4	2.7	2.1	3.7	3.3	3.2

³² Question asked: Do you currently have any of the below pets (that live with you)?

³³ Question asked: How many of each of the following, if any, do you have in your home and are currently available for your cat/s to use at any one time?

Behaviour and stress

Behaviour can be a complicated thing to analyse, with a large degree of crossover between ‘normal’ behaviours, and those that indicate that a cat is stressed. Sometimes, ‘normal’ behaviours that cats exhibit are deemed problematic by their owners, while behaviours that indicate stress are unrecognised or downplayed. This risks owners focusing on the wrong behaviours as concerning, and the potential knock-on effects for cats that may be experiencing stress.

Prevalence and owner perception of common normal and potential stress indicative cat behaviours in Northern Ireland³⁴

 Proportion of cats displaying this behaviour

 Considered a problem by owner (for owners of cats displaying this behaviour)

Jumps onto work surfaces/shelves	47%		28%	
Scratches furniture/carpets/walls	36%		58%	
Wakes me/other members of the household up	33%		22%	
Shows fear towards noise	30%		21%	
Begs for food when I'm eating	25%		18%	
Runs away from household guests	27%		14%	
Brings in wildlife/prey	23%		30%	
Scavenges for food/steals food left out	13%		34%*	
Hides around the house for long periods	11%		26%*	
Not get on/fights with other cats in household	11%		36%*	
Chews wires/leads/chargers	10%		67%*	
Poos outside litter tray	8%		62%*	
Wees outside litter tray	8%		53%*	
Screams/screeches	8%		35%*	
Runs away from me/other adults in the house	7%		27%*	
Sprays outside of the litter tray/inside the house	6%		69%*	
Shows aggressive behaviour towards adults in the house	6%		60%*	
Shows aggressive behaviour towards children in the house	5%		57%*	
Not get on with/fight with my other pets (not cats)	4%		70%*	
Shows aggressive behaviour towards guests in the house	2%		52%*	

*sample size too small for statistical significance

34 Questions asked: Thinking about the past 12 months, which of the following does your cat tend to do, at least some of the time?/Which of the following do you consider problem behaviours that you would like to change?

The behaviours that owners find most problematic often relate to house-soiling, destruction/damage of belongings and aggression. House-soiling and aggressive-type behaviours typically have a compelling reason behind them – be it a medical issue, stress and/or the needs of the cat not being met. Often, resolving the underlying issue for the cat's benefit yields positive results for everyone.

Another thing that owners find problematic – scratching – is also a normal behaviour for cats, used to scent mark and condition their claws, but also relieve stress. Providing appropriate outlets for this behaviour (for example scratching posts) is therefore important, to prevent the behaviour becoming 'destructive'.

Typically, cats from multi-cat households are more likely to display behaviours that owners find most problematic. This highlights the need for owners of multiple cats to not only be aware of the potential signs of stress in cats but also know how best to alleviate it, such as ensuring adequate resource provision and placement, as well as considering the appropriateness of adding any more cats to the household.



Cats Protection firmly believes that positive change comes from ongoing education, which is why this underpins a huge proportion of the work that we do.

Curriculum-based lesson plans and school visits, as well as fun online learning modules are aimed at helping the next generation understand and value cats. Free, interactive talks for community groups spread that word further, and continued education for veterinary professionals means that the research and learnings that will improve feline welfare are disseminated to the people that can implement it best.

Fireworks

Fireworks can be really distressing for all animals, including cats. 30% of Northern Irish cat owners say that their cat shows obvious fear towards noises such as thunder or fireworks, and 68% of those who have witnessed their cat experience fireworks say that their cat seems affected by them³⁵.

The impact of fireworks on cats in Northern Ireland (top behaviours)³⁵

Appears startled

29%

Hides or becomes withdrawn

23%

All these behaviours are indicative of stress in cats. For more advice about fireworks and stress in cats, visit www.cats.org.uk/fireworks



“There needs to be a balance between people being allowed to celebrate key moments with fireworks and the knock-on impacts that this has to wildlife, our pets and other people. Often, the unpredictability of fireworks is a big part of the problem managing the effect that they can have on our pets. That is why Cats Protection continues to call on the government to restrict the unplanned use of fireworks and reduce the maximum noise levels of them. This would help owners anticipate displays and take appropriate action, and ease the stress of all animals, including cats. Cats Protection also sits on a working group, with other leading animal welfare charities, to collaboratively call on the government to undertake a review of fireworks legislation to account for their impact on animal welfare.”

Charlotte Broad, Advocacy & Government Relations Officer, Cats Protection

³⁵ Question asked: Does your cat tend to show any of the following signs of stress as a result of hearing fireworks? Filtered for owners that have seen their cat experience fireworks.

Is escalating cost of living causing cats to be more stressed?

As people, we can all relate to the pressure that the increased cost of living places on everyday life, but are cats experiencing knock-on effects too?

Cats from Northern Irish households that are struggling financially are more likely to show multiple signs of stress. Of course, there are probably many factors at play here, including the risk of stressors for cats and the owner's perception of stress signs in their pet. It does highlight again that cats from households that are struggling financially will likely benefit from a variety of support for their owners however, not just financial assistance. This could include advice on resource placement and education about causes of stress in cats.

Cats showing three + signs of stress³⁶ from Northern Irish households that:

say they've **been negatively impacted by the cost-of-living crisis**

27%

say they've **not been negatively impacted by the cost-of-living crisis**

22%

are **concerned about paying the bills**

31%

are **not concerned about paying the bills**

15%

36 Question asked: Thinking about the past 12 months, which of the following does your cat tend to do, at least some of the time? (Count of stressors).



Companionship and challenges to ownership

Why we have cats³⁷

More than ever, personal wellbeing is a huge driver for cat ownership, with companionship, reducing loneliness and reducing stress being collectively the top reasons that people choose to own a cat in Northern Ireland (55%, 50% in 2022).

37 Question asked: What are the main reasons you have a cat/s? Multiple answers allowed.



Main reasons for owning a cat

As company for me/my family

38%

(36% in 2022)

I've always had cats

35%

(33% in 2022)

To help me feel less stressed/anxious

27%

(23% in 2022)

To help me feel less lonely

26%

(17% in 2022)

They needed looking after/to be taken in

26%

(23% in 2022)

I grew up with cats and so wanted to get my own when I left home

22%

(16% in 2022)

I've just always wanted cats, so got one as soon as I could

20%

(16% in 2022)

As a mouser/to keep my home free from rodents

20%

(13% in 2022)

My child/children wanted one

15%

(14% in 2022)

I wanted a pet animal and thought having a cat would be easier than having a dog

14%

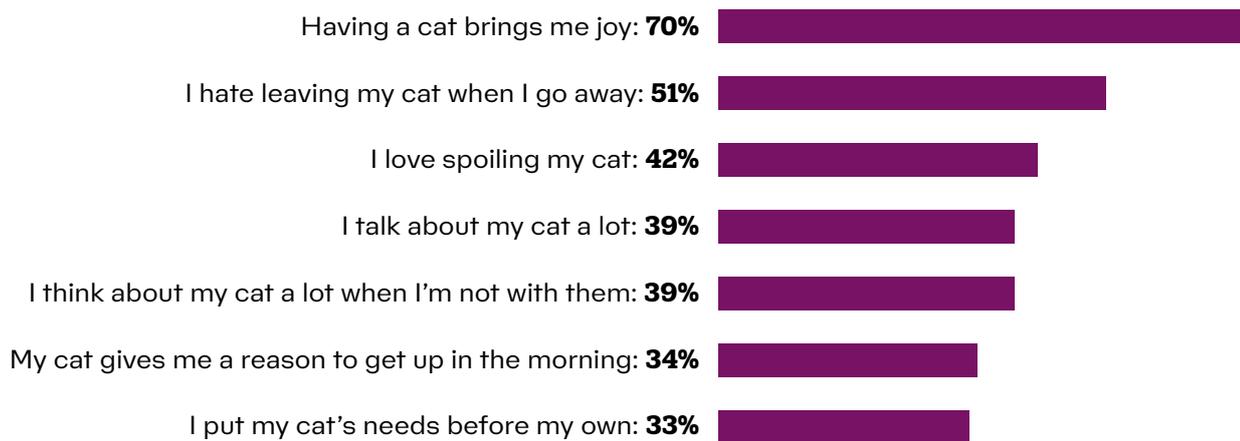
(12% in 2022)

While companionship is overall the most popular reason that people choose to share their life with a cat, this seems to be more important for female Northern Irish owners (41%) than it is for male Northern Irish owners (30%). Uniquely to Northern Ireland though, rodent control entered the top reasons why people own cats, highlighting the value of cats beyond companionship to some owners.

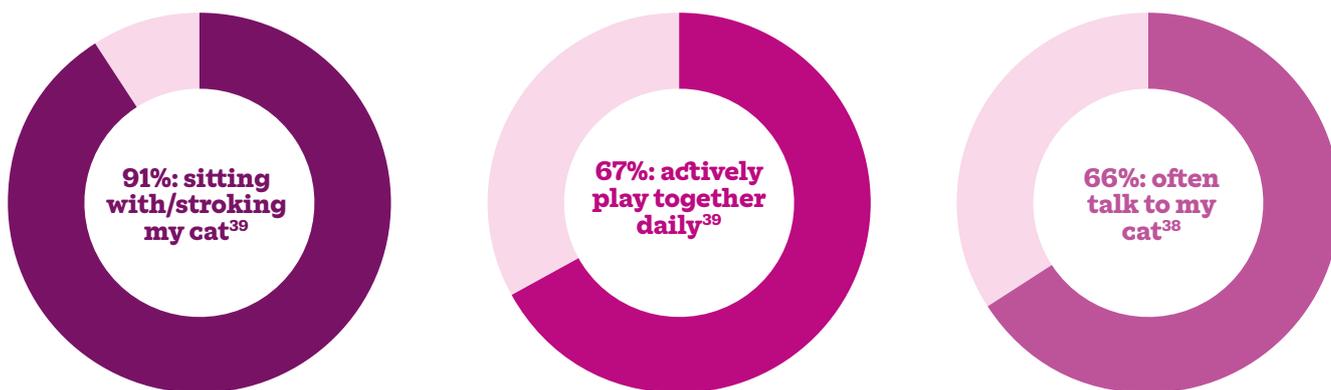
91% of Northern Irish cat owners agreed that they consider their cat part of the family – clearly demonstrating their important position within the household³⁸

³⁸ Question asked: To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements about having a cat/s?

The importance of the cat-owner relationship³⁸



Spending time with our cats



³⁹ Question asked: In an average week, how often do you do each of the following with your cat?



Helping the most vulnerable

Cats Protection understands the special relationship that people have with their cats and provides a range of services that aim to support owners, especially when they are at their most vulnerable.

Examples include the pioneering Lifeline (formerly Paws Protect) service – a free and confidential cat fostering service for people experiencing domestic abuse – and the Paws to Listen grief support service. This free, confidential service puts grieving owners in contact with trained volunteer listeners who are ready to offer emotional support and practical information.

“Each year, the CATS Report continues to highlight the benefits to people of sharing their life with a cat, who provide companionship, and reduce both stress and loneliness for many cat owners. However, we know that the death of a much-loved pet can be devastating, and even a hurdle to future cat ownership, reflecting the trauma this loss can bring. Cats Protection aims to support people through the complete journey of sharing a life with a cat, including the difficult time after loss, and therefore has created our Paws to Listen service, to offer a sympathetic ear at a difficult time.”

**Catherine Joyce,
Paws to Listen Team Leader,
Cats Protection**

The ongoing cost of cats

For many Northern Irish owners, the rising cost of living is a big concern, with 15% seriously worrying about how they will meet their cat's needs in the future – higher than anywhere else in the UK⁴⁰. 9% say that they have already had to reduce their spending on necessities such as cat food and litter and 3% have had to rely on food banks to feed their cat⁴¹. 29% of Northern Irish owners have doubts about how they would pay vet bills if their cat became sick or injured and 25% of Northern Irish cat owners are very concerned about being able to pay bills and other living costs over the next 12 months⁴⁰, due to inflation and interest rate rises, and associated impacts on regular household outgoings, such as mortgage payments.

It is interesting that helping to reduce stress is consistently more likely to be the main reason for cat ownership for people that are concerned about finances. This is further indication of the benefits of cat ownership for people who are facing the big challenges of life.

“The cost-of-living crisis represents a huge issue for cat welfare, with many owners facing impossible choices as costs continue to rise. No one should be forced to give up a beloved pet and no cat should be left hungry. We are proud to be working with our colleagues across the sector to get donated food into the bowls of cats in need.”

Peter Shergold, Head of Field Operations, Cats Protection



⁴⁰ Question asked: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

⁴¹ Question asked: And thinking about the last 12 months, which of the below, if any, apply to you?



Helping to lessen the pinch

Cats Protection is dedicated to helping cat owners continue to lovingly meet their cats' needs through these hard financial times, for the benefit of both the cat and their owner.

One example of this is the partnership of Cats Protection with multiple charitable and corporate organisations to secure cat food for distribution via FareShare – the UK's largest charity fighting hunger and food waste. This alliance has already helped thousands of cats be protected from the financial pressures that their owners face.

Cats Protection's branches and centres across the country are also partnering directly with food banks and community partners to provide families with cat food, to help feed their pet.

Cats Protection has also produced guidance on how to take care of your cat when facing rising living costs, including information about our neutering voucher scheme, how to help keep vet bills down and top tips on keeping day-to-day cat care costs as low as possible.

To access this guidance visit www.cats.org.uk/cost-of-living



Cats in Northern Ireland, in summary



State of the nation

- There are 230,000 owned cats in Northern Ireland
- 63% of Northern Irish cat-owning households have one cat; 37% own two or more cats

UK cat ownership:

	In millions		% of cat owning households	
	2022	2023	2022	2023
Total UK	11	11	26%	26%
Wales	0.6	0.6	28%	29%
England	9.2	9.2	26%	26%
Scotland	0.9	0.8	24%	22%
Northern Ireland	0.3	0.2	26%	21%

The cat market

- The UK-wide trend for people to increasingly buy, rather than adopt cats is not evident in Northern Ireland
- 62% of the Northern Irish cat population are moggies, 22% are pedigrees/pure-breeds and 1% are cross-breeds (11% don't know)

Veterinary care

- 22% of Northern Irish owners state that they have experienced difficulty accessing a vet in the last 12 months, down from 27% in 2022
- 11% of Northern Irish cats are not registered with a vet (UK: 10%)
- Northern Ireland has the lowest vaccination rate of all the devolved nations: 67% (according to their owner). This is down from 72% in 2022
- 83% of Northern Irish cats are neutered (UK: 85%)
- Northern Ireland has the lowest microchipping rate of all the devolved nations: 67%. However, this is up from 60% in 2022
- 29% of Northern Irish cat owners are concerned about how they would pay the vet bill if their cat became sick or injured (UK: 25%)

Cat care, welfare and behaviour

- 62% of Northern Irish cats have both indoor and outdoor access
- Northern Ireland has a lower proportion of indoor-only cats, compared to the UK as a whole (31% vs. 37%)
- 57% of Northern Irish owners aren't aware that lilies are toxic to cats

Companionship and challenges to ownership

- 38% own a cat for companionship
- 27% own a cat to help them feel less stressed or anxious
- 26% own a cat to help them feel less lonely
- 20% own a cat for rodent control – Northern Ireland is the only devolved nation for which this enters the top reasons for owning a cat.
- Cost of living concerns:
 - 15% of Northern Irish cat owners seriously worry about how they will meet their cat's needs in the future – higher than anywhere else in the UK
 - 9% of Northern Irish cat owners say that they have had to reduce their spending on necessities such as cat food and litter in the last 12 months
 - 3% of Northern Irish cat owners have had to rely on food banks to feed their cat over the last 12 months

Where do we go from here?

A message from John May, Cats Protection's Chief Executive

We often talk about the importance of seeing the world through cats' eyes. In its fourth year, the Cats and Their Stats (CATS) Report Northern Ireland continues to provide vital additional insight into the perceptions of cat owners.

With owners facing significant changes and challenges over the past few years, we need to keep up to date with how cat welfare is being impacted, and work to provide the right support and advice to those who need it.

The insights from this report indicate that cats and their owners are being affected by the global challenges of the last few years. We aim to use this report not only to steer our practical activities and ensure they're relevant to the needs of cats in Northern Ireland, but also to influence policy makers and other key stakeholders.

As the UK's largest cat welfare charity with more than 10,000 volunteers and employees across the country, Cats Protection is well placed to deliver the support that's needed. I'm delighted that we continue to invest in our neutering programme, have successfully campaigned for compulsory pet cat microchipping in England and are delivering targeted support to owners to help them through the cost-of-living crisis.

One of the consistent findings of the CATS Report is that methods of cat acquisition are shifting – Cats Protection is here for all cats and will continue to strive to offer the advice and support owners need; regardless of where owners get their cat.

However, the continued shift to more cats being purchased undoubtedly presents challenges for animal welfare charities, with fewer cats being adopted at the same time as more owners are looking to relinquish their pets. Cats Protection will seek to highlight its research and work with the wider sector and government to help address these issues.

The changes in the market may also be fuelling issues that have a detrimental impact on cat welfare such as kitten smuggling and poor breeding practices, so our work to speak up for cats and ensure they are provided adequate protections in regulation will continue to be critical as we seek to achieve our mission.

Cats Protection's vision is a society where every cat has their best possible life because they are protected, cared for and understood by everyone. The findings of the CATS Report and other research conducted by Cats Protection enables an improved understanding, so that we can make our vision a reality.





Services

Rehoming cats – For those looking to adopt a cat or to have theirs rehomed.

www.cats.org.uk/contact-us or 03000 12 12 12

Neutering support – Providing thousands of people each year with financial assistance for neutering.

www.cats.org.uk/neutering

Education talks – Free talks to schools (curriculum-based) and community groups, advising both adults and children about cat behaviour and responsible pet ownership.

www.cats.org.uk/education

Cat Guardians – A free service aimed at giving peace of mind to cat owners that are concerned about what might happen if they were to pass away before their cat.

www.cats.org.uk/catguardians or 01825 741 291

Paws to Listen – A free grief support service run by trained volunteer listeners, for those dealing with the loss of their cat whether through death, going missing or separation.

www.cats.org.uk/paws-to-listen or 0800 024 9494

General advice – A helpline for those with any questions regarding their own cats, or cats in general.

www.cats.org.uk/contact-us or 03000 12 12 12



For further information contact stats@cats.org.uk or visit www.cats.org.uk/stats

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