

Cats Protection – ADCH talk

The Association of Dogs and Cats Homes (ADCH) has a membership of all of the large and many smaller rescue charities. The ADCH aims to share good practice and raise standards in rescue and rehoming work.

On 12 November 2014, Peter Hepburn, CEO of Cats Protection (CP), hosted an ADCH meeting of about 55 people and gave this talk about CP's new Homing Centre at Gildersome, Leeds.



Photo: Front of Gildersome Homing Centre

HELP! I'm running out of cats! I never expected to be saying this at an ADCH meeting.

We have come here so that you can look at a totally new concept in rescue, Cats Protection's new Homing Centre at Gildersome. My presentation here is designed to match with a talk by Diane Mulcahy, our Centre Manager, who will be pleased to show you round the centre. I'll tell you the story of how we got here with an overview of what we are aiming to do at Gildersome. I want to share with you some ideas that might be of value to you, whether you home cats or dogs or anything else.

Open your mind to new experiences – our centre is very different from anything else you will find.

Before I tell you about the Gildersome model, I want to talk about what we do elsewhere, which is similar to what we all do. We rescue animals, can't help them all, certainly not as fast as we or they would like. It costs us a lot of money and we always believe that if we had more money, more people, we could help more animals.

So in Cats Protection our typical centre is:

- 👉 Between 35 and 200 pens, taking in as many cats as we can
- 👉 We get them ready by vet checking, nursing them back to health as needed, neutering, microchipping, etc. and we never euthanase, except on veterinary advice

- 👉 We do all we can to home our cats, typically between 300 and 1,000 cats a year from different centres
- 👉 Some of our centres are old legacy sites, hidden away. We put out lots of publicity so people know we are there
- 👉 We have staff to feed cats seven days a week, morning and evening and to run the centre
- 👉 We subsidise the net loss (building, staff and running costs, less the adoption fee) from fundraised income, especially legacies

Gildersome operating model

The new model of operation for Gildersome was agreed by Trustees as:

- 👉 Just 12 pens
- 👉 We take into our fosterers as many cats as we can
- 👉 Volunteers get them ready by vet checking, neutering, chipping, etc
- 👉 We do all we can to home our cats. We homed 430 in our first year at Gildersome
- 👉 Our new site is on good communications routes and we still give it lots of publicity
- 👉 We have volunteers to feed cats seven days a week, morning and evening, with three staff posts to manage the centre, including volunteers
- 👉 We subsidise the much smaller net cost (building, staff and running costs, less adoption fee) from two local shops and fundraised income, especially legacies.
- 👉 And our nearby shops not only raise funds but also promote the cat work at the centre

Compared with the original plan, we've actually opened two shops linked with the centre (Bramley and Morley), not one. Also local branches and other adoption centres have supplied some ready-to-home cats to the centre, in addition to fosterers.

Trustees approved the development and opening during the period of CP's financial pressures because the model of a small, low net cost homing centre with strong volunteer involvement was seen to be a likely way to increase homing while minimising the extra net cost to the charity. Against these aims the centre has delivered very well.

Homing



Picture: two black cats

In its first 12 months, from opening at the end of October 2013 to October 2014 Gildersome Homing Centre homed 421 cats and kittens from 12 homing pens. In fact, in the month of October 2014 we homed 61 cats, which is equivalent to an annual rate of 730 each year!

While Gildersome Homing Centre has to be very careful about balancing its intake so that a range of cats can always be found at the centre, all ages of cats are homed and 40 per cent have been the harder-to-home black or black and white.

So, in terms of learning from this pilot project, we believe that 12 pens, while a small number, do not present a barrier to good levels of homing provided the location is suitable.

And money

There are several ways of analysing the financial performance of a centre. The key points are that:

- 👉 The more cats we home, the more subsidy we incur
- 👉 The faster we home cats, the more the average cost goes up as each pen sees more of the high cost early period vet bills

On any measure it is clear that the involvement of volunteers and the multiple sources of funding (two shops, centre fundraising and adoption fees, donated food, litter etc) mean that this is a highly efficient operation and that it has far exceeded our (cautious) financial plans.

The cost for the first year was £166k; £32k was raised at the centre and £64k by the shops. So the subsidy from our central fundraising was just £70k for 430 cats, some £160 a cat.

But things are not what they seem. Some of these cats were taken in through the centre's fosterers, but others came from elsewhere. One local branch, up in Wharf Valley, does an amazing job of handling the fallout from multi-cat households and spends serious money on those cats, some of which have found a home from Gildersome. So there are some hidden costs... but the branch is happy as they get their cats into homes, saving money on the longer-term care of those cats. Of course, they then fill the pen again and start incurring more cost, and so life goes on, but we have opened a shop for that branch too, and a second is on its way.

The picture, however, is that the level of subsidy is down to a similar level to our wonderful, efficient, volunteer-run branches, and less than half the subsidy of our average adoption centre. And as fundraising is in its infancy from this centre, the picture is expected to improve. For example, the centre is actively marketing legacies and when even one arrives, as it certainly will in due course, that could have a significant positive effect on the already excellent finances.

Build costs

The total cost to build Gildersome was almost £1million, including the land purchase price of £220,000 and a sum still to spend on an isolation unit and staff and volunteers'

summerhouse. By comparison, other traditional new-build centres with similar homing levels now cost between £2m and £4m and can cost twice that.

So the site plus build costs of the centre, just like the net running costs, are more cost efficient than other Cats Protection homing models, or those of other charities.

Cat intake

I mentioned at the start that the supply of ready to home cats has presented us with our biggest challenge – the cost of success. Gildersome Homing Centre homes well and homes quickly, placing pressure on the speed at which pens need to be filled. Just imagine – the centre has had weekends where every single available cat has been reserved. It is a very nice problem to have!

To date the centre has 16 active fosterers, plus four more recruited recently, which is a great achievement for the first year especially as some of our branches find the recruitment of fosterers particularly challenging. However, to achieve self-sufficiency the centre needs at least 30 active fosterers – maybe more if homing levels increase a lot.

One way in which we may be able to smooth the intake path for cats is to accelerate the intake of cats who can be prepared for homing while still in their former home environment, using our centre vets or even other vets,

People – volunteers

We have been very successful in recruiting and retaining volunteers to undertake cat care related duties – to date the centre has 70 on-site plus four van drivers, three receptionists and a person who manages the collection tins and bins.

Despite the high numbers, there can be occasions where nobody from the rota attends for their session and the centre is doing its best to address this. Staff then step in so that the cats are cared for.

Three education volunteers have been recruited and work actively with the centre and the CP Regional Education Officer, Kirsty-Lou Watson.

The shops have successfully recruited shop volunteers but, as with our experiences elsewhere in CP, there is not a great deal of doubling up between shop and cat volunteers. Given that shop volunteers and most Homing Centre volunteers give day shifts of time, we anticipated that there might have been a greater degree of cross-over – but there wasn't!

People – staff

The centre has had two paid, permanent members of staff, the Manager (Diane Mulcahy) and Deputy (Christina Mageen). In fact we started with two staff, then 2.5, but now our centre manager's success at recruiting volunteers has meant that we have decided to have a third post, focused on volunteer recruitment, induction, training and support.

Design, build and environmental



Picture: cat pens

In overall terms the centre looks nice and the cats are happy with it, as are the staff and volunteers. The physical location, with a nearby community and public transport is excellent and (we feel) this is one key factor in the rates of homing.

The building work was started in Feb 2013 and completed in Oct 2013 and (apart from the discovery of the bell-pits) was trouble free and well managed.

Three learning points are that having so many people has meant that staff and volunteer facilities were too small, so we hope to add a conservatory style extension.

Also with more people, parking has been a challenge, but the ever resourceful manager has negotiated a deal with a local pub. She wouldn't tell me the details of the arrangement but in my imagination they give us a few parking spaces and, in return, we guarantee to drink the place dry every Saturday night.

Thirdly our aim is a controlled intake via fosterers. We don't want intake on site – it's not what we are set up to do and particularly for disease control reasons – but to cater for dumped cats and kittens, we are thinking to add a couple of freestanding isolation pens, to cater for the inevitable emergencies.

Communications: internal and community

I've talked about homing as if that's what a homing centre does – which is true, but also a real success of this project has been the level of community engagement that has taken place. From neighbours, religious centres, shops and businesses, they have all been to the centre. Working in conjunction with the Cats Protection's Education Officer in the region (Kirsty-Lou Watson) three education volunteers have been recruited and talks, events and centre tours have taken place. These have also included representatives from the local Asian community – links we are keen to develop further.

We are also on the Leeds City Council Animal Welfare Forum with other animal charities, housing, neighbourhood groups and social services and this is work that we would like to develop further.

The centre has a good working relationship with the PDSA. Meetings have been held with the RSPCA staff and local branch and the local inspector has visited the centre. And, of course, the centre is on good terms with our neighbours at the lovely Yorkshire Cat Rescue, also a member of ADCH.

Overall conclusions



Picture: outside Gildersome Homing Centre

- 👍 Starting with cats, good welfare is achieved on several levels. First we would always prefer cats to be in homes, not in pens. All of our admissions work is done in people's homes, not pens at the centre. We minimise days in care by homing fast. And we help lots of cats in need of homes
- 👍 People – we are a volunteer-based charity. Volunteers are in our life-blood. 100 volunteers enjoy keeping the centre running – ask them – and we invest training and support for the volunteers. From a staffing point of view, my advice to anyone is to get yourself a fabulous manager like Di... then it's all simple!
- 👍 Money – the model is effective in terms capital build, running costs and income
- 👍 The “simple” build type with just 12 pens is sufficient for our needs and can be built quickly and relatively cheaply

We think that the centre has been a huge success. We are always limited in the number of cats we can help by not having enough money. Just think if we could continue the trend of what we have achieved and get a centre to totally cover its running costs. We would then just have to fund the capital build, but we could put centres like this anywhere in the country where cats need our help.

As well as our marvellous staff and volunteers on site I want to pay credit too Mandy Hill, our Head of Operations for the region, and Andrea Bullock, Development Manager, who made a formidable team driving this project through to great success.

And a few surprises:

- 👉 We used to think that we helped more cats by building a big centre. That was wrong
- 👉 The size of the homing market and our skill at accessing it determine the number of cats we help. Every cat we home means we can take in another cat to help
- 👉 The more pens we have at a site, the longer we keep the cats in our care which is bad welfare and higher cost
- 👉 By reducing the cost, while never compromising welfare, we can actually help more cats

And no surprise – go and visit to see some lovely cats there. I love cats and if you do too, it's a lovely place to visit.

And secondly, no surprise, Cats Protection volunteers and staff are great. They are amazing.