



Head of the class

Kirsty-Lou Watson, our Community Education Officer for North & Midlands, explains what her role involves...

At Cats Protection we work towards three main aims: the homing of cats – delivered by our branches and adoption centres; the neutering of cats – supported by our neutering team which issues vouchers to people on means-tested benefits; and last but no means least, educating the public about cat welfare.

Here in the Education team we currently have three Community Education Officers. I cover the north and Midlands, another officer covers the west of England, Wales and Northern Ireland and another covers London and the south east. We are also expanding the education service to cover the south west of England and southern Scotland. The team trains and supports volunteers to deliver education talks to nurseries, schools and community groups.

When someone gets in touch with us expressing an interest in delivering talks, they receive a pack full of all kinds of workshop plans to get them started. These are used to make sure we are delivering consistent messages about the charity. Sometimes it can be a little overwhelming wondering where to start when delivering a talk, so we hope that our resources help volunteers overcome any barriers they may have; but we always welcome ideas on how the talks can be changed, updated or improved to fit their own style of delivery.

All of the children's education talks are based on ways children and families can take positive steps to ensure that their cat's Five Welfare Needs are being met. These welfare needs are:

- need for a suitable environment
- need for a suitable diet
- need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- need to be housed with, or apart, from other animals
- need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

We translate these needs into age-appropriate talks for the children. Through our talks they'll be learning about the Animal Welfare Act 2006 in a workshop which is always fun and engaging.

As well as sending volunteers information packs, we invite them to observe their local Education Officer delivering a talk. They then have the opportunity to deliver their own talk and receive feedback on how it went and suggestions of any further development or support they may need.

We actively encourage all education volunteers who are new to Cats Protection to complete our E-Learning Module, Understanding Feline Origins (UFO). This is a free online course which helps our volunteers to understand the basic needs of cats. Members of the public are encouraged to complete this module too, as we're positive everyone will discover something new about cats. It can be found in the 'Learn' section of the Cats Protection website.



Education volunteer for Macclesfield Branch, Irene North delivering a talk for Hayfield Cubs in Derbyshire

A supportive network

We don't just support new volunteers who want to deliver education talks though; we support any branch member or adoption centre staff who may be interested in delivering talks too.

We have volunteers of all ages and from many different backgrounds, so wherever they're from they'll gain lots of experience speaking to the public. Volunteers find that no one talk is the same and are always surprised by their audience. Diana Johnson, the education speaker for our Northampton Branch talks a little bit about her role: "In my talks, mainly at the moment with Cubs, Brownies and similar, I am constantly amazed at the knowledge that the youngsters have. One bright little lad – when asked what a microchip was – gave me a full scientific explanation. He got a round of applause! One has to test the audience and bring out the shy ones, so they all get something from the talk and involve them at all levels. I feel if I can help children to understand the meaning of care and affection and involve them with their pets, they are on the way to a life of more understanding both for animals and other people".

"Oggy, oggy, oggy... oi, oi, oi" is a familiar chant you'll hear coming from guiding and scouting groups. However when Mike and Irene North from the Macclesfield Branch deliver education talks to these groups, they like to change it to "Moggy, moggy, moggy... cat, cat, cat!". That's just another example of how volunteers can make the talks their own.

We encourage volunteers to send out feedback forms after they have given a talk as it's a great way for them to receive the praise they deserve. It also helps to inform the education team of any changes we might need to make to our resources and ensures that our talks are set at the right level.

Nutley Church of England Primary School in East Sussex was delighted with its talk. "The children were very excited to find out more about the cats and filled in the quizzes as soon as they could," says Sarah Deaden, a teacher at the school. "They loved the masks and were role-playing, sleeping, eating and scratching with their masks on! All the children in both groups enjoyed the experience. They talked afterwards about what they had found out and a lot of them went home very keen to share it with their parents. Thank you all so much for coming to our school. We had a wonderful time and can't wait to cover the topic of animals again, so that we can ask you to come back!"

The workshops are designed to be a fun and an interactive way to learn about cats, but because we don't bring real cats with us (so as not to cause unnecessary stress), even children with allergies to cats will be able to take part. Even if they don't own a cat they'll still be able to discover the appropriate way to treat them, which is important as they're one of the most popular pets in the UK.

At the end of each workshop, the children are presented with free Cats Protection goodies and teachers or group leaders can also get advice about follow-up material on cat welfare which can be used in the class at a later date.

Education Officer Kirsty-Lou Watson delivering a talk to Oakfield Park School, Barnsley



On the up

In addition to children's talks, we've recently created a new talk for adults, which can be used at Women's Institute meetings, Rotary Clubs or any other adult community group. During this talk, the audience discover how to make their home a more welcoming environment to their cat, basic care tips such as when to give worming medication and de-flea as well as the importance of microchipping and neutering your cat. The talk includes short videos about what your cat is trying to tell you through its body language, with Cats Protection's own cat behaviourist, Nicky Trevorrow, presenting the videos.

Over the next year we're working towards targeting large cities to deliver education talks. Even though over the years education work has been delivered in cities, we're now working towards a new delivery structure consisting of several volunteer education speakers and a volunteer education co-ordinator. We feel this structure will encourage team building among volunteers as well as consistent delivery of the education talks for Cats Protection. We're very excited about this prospect and really believe it will benefit the volunteers and go a long way to making sure that Cats Protection's messages are heard by as many people as possible.

We plan to roll out this new structure across the whole of the education network in the UK so that the team can continue to its excellent work supporting Cats Protection's vision for "a world where every cat is treated with kindness and an understanding of its needs".

We've got an exciting future ahead and can't wait to spread the message of cat welfare! ●

If you are interested in finding out more, whether it's volunteering for the education team or hosting a free workshop, please get in touch by emailing education@cats.org.uk