



Helping pets escape domestic abuse

*As Cats Protection celebrates the 10th anniversary of the Dogs Trust Freedom Project, **Amy Rutter** looks back over the scheme and the cats we've helped...*



Photo: istockphoto.com/philly077

How the project works

The Freedom Project is a Dogs Trust scheme – they take referrals for dogs from members of the public fleeing domestic abuse and organisations on their behalf, while referring cats into our care. The service is completely free and available to pet owners seeking emergency refuge in Greater London and Hertfordshire (as well as these areas, Dogs Trust also takes dogs in Yorkshire).

People fleeing domestic abuse are not normally able to take their pets with them to a refuge, so we place their cats with volunteer foster carers who look after them in their own homes until the owners are in a position to take them back.

When a cat is referred to us by Dogs Trust, we will consider any requirements it may have such as health, socialisation needs and any behavioural concerns to ensure it is matched with a suitable and experienced fosterer. We board the cats in a fosterer's care and the average length of stay is five to nine months. A cat is only returned to its owner once they are out of the refuge and safe.

The fosterer will not know the identity or location of the owner and vice versa, to ensure that both cat and owner are anonymous and safe. The owner cannot visit their pet during this period, however monthly updates on the cat's welfare are provided by Cats Protection and sent onto the owners direct by Dogs Trust Freedom Project staff. We use pet taxis to collect and transfer pets between the owner's home and our care so that fosterers and owners do not have contact and retain their anonymity.

One client of the Dogs Trust Freedom Project, Sarah*, from south London left her cat in the capable hands of a fosterer for six months. She says "Being able to receive a letter once a month or so [with updates about the cat] was a big chunk of happiness in an otherwise not so happy life. Without people ▶

Between 2011 and 2012 two million people reported experiencing domestic abuse (Crime Survey for England and Wales). Many struggle to leave violent relationships for fear of leaving their pets behind or putting them at risk and latest Dogs Trust Freedom Project statistics reveal that 52 per cent of people's pets were also threatened or abused by a violent partner. One person told Dogs Trust that their abuser "threatened to kill my pets in front of me". For those who do flee violent relationships, their options regarding their beloved pets are very limited.

That's why in 2004 we began working in partnership with Dogs Trust on their Freedom Project which helps the pets of families ripped apart by domestic abuse. This year, in its 10th anniversary, the project is looking stronger than ever.

Dogs Trust Freedom Project works alongside other organisations such as the RSPCA and Wood Green, who provide similar pet fostering services across the country, to ensure that pets are safe and cared for by volunteers until their owners are able to be safely reunited with them. These services fall under the umbrella of the LINKS group, which is a multi-agency interest group that promotes the welfare and safety of vulnerable children, animals and adults so that they are free from violence and abuse.

Since working with the Dogs Trust Freedom Project, we have helped over 350 cats from families of domestic abuse, whose pets are potentially at risk of harm.

Protecting yourself online

If you don't want information about the sites you visit to be saved on your computer, when browsing the internet you can switch on 'private browsing' (or 'incognito' mode in Chrome) so that pages you visit and files you download aren't recorded in your histories and all cookies are deleted.

- **Firefox** – click on the menu button then 'new private window'
- **Google Chrome** – click on the menu button then 'new incognito window'
- **Internet Explorer** – start 'InPrivate Browsing' from the safety menu
- **Safari** – click on the Safari menu bar then 'Private Browsing...', click OK

You can also disable your Google web history so that your searches aren't recorded in your Google account; or alternatively make sure you're not signed into a Google account when you search.

DISCLAIMER: Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals

like you and projects like this, I would never have been able to move forward. My son and I are in a good place, but it's not an exaggeration to say that without you that simply wouldn't have been possible.

"Thank you to the nicest lady with the biggest heart, who looked after my cat," she adds. "I've never had a chance to meet her but I'm eternally grateful".

The value of our volunteers

All our Freedom Project fosterers are volunteers, who look after the cats on the scheme in their own homes so that the cat is living in a normal environment. Going into a household that already has cats could be stressful for the cat and the resident cats too, so we make sure our fosterers have no other cats or dogs. This ensures that the project cat has a good, comfortable quality of life and its welfare is priority.

Louise, a fosterer from north London feels that the experience is very rewarding. "When I first heard about the project I thought it was such a fantastic idea, and a potentially crucial service," she says.

"My family has always had cats so I know just how close you feel to a longstanding pet – and I can therefore imagine how, even if you were facing domestic abuse, the prospect of leaving your pet behind could make you think twice about fleeing a dangerous situation. It's a really special project and it's incredibly rewarding to feel that I'm playing a part in it, however small. I'm really, really glad I got involved."

Cats Protection covers costs that fosterers incur through the project such as those for cat food, litter and veterinary expenses. We also provide relevant equipment such as cat beds, litter trays, feeding bowls, a scratching post and more.

All transport between the owner and fosterer is paid for too. Every cat in our care is treated to our minimum veterinary standards, meaning it will be microchipped, vaccinated and neutered if necessary.

Fosterers also receive visits from Cats Protection and ongoing support throughout the project period. All this means that, excluding any unforeseen veterinary costs, it costs us over £300 per cat for five months of care.

Donations from our supporters are vital to ensure we can continue to help cats fleeing the homes of domestic abuse. To help fund our work with the Dogs Trust Freedom Project, you can donate at www.cats.org.uk/freedom-project-donate ●

Further information and resources: **

- **National Domestic Violence Helpline (24 hours) – 0800 2000 247**
Run in partnership with Refuge (www.refuge.org.uk) and Women's Aid (www.womensaid.org.uk)
- **Wales Domestic Abuse Helpline – 0800 80 10 800**
- **Dogs Trust Freedom Project – www.dogstrustfreedomproject.org.uk**
Greater London – 0800 298 9199
Yorkshire – 0800 083 4322 (dogs only)

**If you want to enquire about placing your cat in the care of Cats Protection through the Dogs Trust Freedom Project, contact Dogs Trust as we take cat referrals directly from them.

