



# Together for

For **Sharyn Wood**, teamwork is the key to a successful branch. But the Co-ordinator of Arbroath & Carnoustie Adoption Centre has taken her collaborative approach a step further, as she explains to Rebecca Evans

It's tough to get Sharyn Wood to talk about herself. The Co-ordinator of Cats Protection's Arbroath & Carnoustie Adoption Centre is a confirmed team player.

"You can have ideas, but you can't put them in place without everyone else being on board," she says.

Arbroath & Carnoustie has achieved much since Sharyn became the centre's Co-ordinator in 2004, including rehoming an impressive 300–400 cats a year. In its best year so far, the Scottish centre rehomed 450 felines.

Sharyn's collaborative approach extends much further than her immediate team, though. Her centre is part of a network of CP branches in north-east Scotland that help and support each other in their work, reflecting CP's One Charity ethos.

"We don't have borders between our branches; they're completely blurred," she explains.

Because of this wider team approach, more than half of the cats rehomed from Arbroath & Carnoustie come from other branches.

Even Sharyn's ascension to the Co-ordinator role was something of a collective decision. She'd first volunteered in 1997, taking cats to the vet from the centre, which is set in countryside three miles north of Arbroath, a small harbour town on the North Sea coast.

Then, in 2004, the Branch Co-ordinator role became vacant unexpectedly. The centre volunteers, recognising Sharyn's leadership potential, encouraged her to accept the position.

"At that point, I said I'd only do it if everybody else took a role as well. We divided up all the roles and I took the Co-ordinator's role," she says.

So Sharyn found herself in charge of the Arbroath & Carnoustie Adoption Centre, which now has 12 pens, an isolation unit, kitchen and office. At that time, though, it was just "a few pens dotted about and a shed".

While Sharyn had plenty of business experience, as she owns a care home with her husband Nick, she quickly discovered she'd need to adapt her approach for volunteers.

"When I started as a Co-ordinator I had my 'dealing with employees' hat with me, and I had to leave that at home very quickly. Tact is the biggest lesson I learnt."

## Volunteers welcome

Sharyn, who has always loved cats, knew that to help more felines she would have to increase the centre's volunteer base. Initially, she used word of mouth to persuade more people to join her team.

"The volunteers that we had were all very enthusiastic so we asked them to put out feelers and bring along friends... After a year or so we decided to expand and put an advert in the local paper. Lots of volunteers have come along since then."

There's no such thing as a typical team member at the centre. Some are long-term helpers, others are unemployed and looking for something to keep them occupied. A number



*“We don’t have borders between our branches; they’re completely blurred”*

# cats

of the centre’s volunteers have been animal care students looking for practical experience, others were completing their Duke of Edinburgh award.

Sharyn says: “If they come to us and say they can only give us help for the next six months then we welcome them with open arms. The more people we have here the more our story is put out.”

Sharyn now has a 50-strong band of helpers, with 30 of those on adoption centre duties. Every day of the week, two or three volunteers do the morning shift, feeding the cats and cleaning their pens. Others cover the afternoon shift, including the two hours, 2pm–4pm, the centre is open to the public. Later on, volunteers do what Sharyn calls the “tuck-in service”, looking after the cats’ needs in the evening. The centre also has off-site maternity pens, looked after by volunteer Brenda Reid.

Once duties have been allocated and discussed, Sharyn is happy to let her team get on with their tasks. “I’m not going to look over everyone’s shoulder all the time,” she says.

As she grew her band of volunteers, Sharyn also started to raise awareness of the branch in Arbroath and further afield. Her team attended fairs and festivals, taking along all the information they could about the centre and its activities. Every day, volunteers update the centre’s website and Facebook page with details of cats and kittens, helping to reach potential owners near and far.

As well as general awareness-raising, Sharyn has made sure to get the word out about specific activities. Arbroath & Carnoustie is one of many CP centres and branches that offer financial help with cat neutering. This help is particularly important in Arbroath, which has economic challenges.



Sharyn works closely with other CP Co-ordinators

“Arbroath is an area where there’s an awful lot of unemployment,” says Sharyn. “People sometimes can’t afford to keep animals. We try to alleviate that by advertising everywhere that if anyone’s on benefits, on low income or would have difficulty neutering their cat then please get in contact.”

She adds: “We do a lot of free neutering. These people would not be able to afford the vet fees. It’s in our best interests to prevent unwanted kittens.”

Under Sharyn’s guidance, the centre has pushed its message into the local community, reaching schools, colleges and social groups. Volunteer Brenda Reid, who also looks after the centre’s off-site maternity pens, gives talks for schools and social groups; these are publicised by their friendly local librarian. Brownie and Scout groups have visited the centre. And an exciting new partnership is under discussion; the volunteer trainer Margaret Miller is in talks with Angus College to agree a scheme for animal care students to visit the centre for classes and work experience. The arrangement should be in place by the end of the year.

As well as raising awareness, Sharyn has set about looking for more and better opportunities to raise funds. The centre has two volunteers in charge of fundraising, Margaret Miller and Laura Robertson, and the hard-working pair have their own team, too. They organise at least one cash-generating event a month.

The highlight of the centre’s fundraising calendar is its Open Day in June, held in a field at the back of the centre. This year’s event featured stalls, a bouncy castle, barbeque, strawberry cream teas and face painting.

Reflecting on her achievements over the past eight years, Sharyn says: “I think people are far more aware of us now.” ▶

## Pulling together

But the efforts of Sharyn and her team in transforming the centre's performance are only half the story. Because Sharyn regards the centre as part of an even wider team; Arbroath & Carnoustie is one of seven CP branches and centres in north-east Scotland that regularly help one another. Last year, around 54 per cent of the cats homed from Sharyn's centre came from other branches. In 2010, that figure was 67 per cent. "The cats have gained from it," she says of the inter-branch co-operation.

Every quarter, the north-east Scotland network group meets up for a chat over a cup of tea. The seven branches help each other in all sorts of different ways.

Rehoming, for instance. If a visitor from outside of Arbroath wants to rehome a cat from the Adoption Centre, Sharyn will check with the Co-ordinator of the visitor's nearest branch that they're happy for the rehoming to go ahead.

Sharyn explains: "Usually, what happens is they ask us for help because we have the adoption centre...we probably have too big a facility for our area...any Co-ordinator that's having trouble or has an emergency can phone up and ask if we've got an empty pen. We don't believe in keeping our pens empty."

Sharyn says this flexible approach fits the way people now look for a cat. "Because of the internet, people are looking and seeing a cat they like from miles away. People will travel if they've seen a cat." And, because of increasing web use, the centre's reach goes even further than north-east Scotland. Sharyn has rehomed cats to and from Edinburgh and the West Coast with the help of local branches.

Once a cat is transferred to Arbroath & Carnoustie, whether directly or from another branch, Sharyn's team do everything they can to find him a good home. This happens relatively quickly; so far, no cat has stayed at the centre for longer than six months. And this length of stay is rare.

"We've very proactive in finding new homes," says Sharyn. "The way we advertise the cats is intended to bring people in to meet them." When visitors ask to see a particular cat, the volunteers encourage them to meet all the mogs. Then if the cat they come to see isn't suitable, they can consider another.

Centre volunteers only carry out home visits to potential adopters by exception. In Arbroath "everyone knows everyone else" says Sharyn, so, for local homings at least, volunteers usually already know if the potential adopter's house is suitable for the cat.

Her team encourages new cat owners to stay in touch by uploading photographs to Facebook of their cat relaxing in his new home. These adopters often go on to recommend the centre to their friends so the rehoming successes continue.

Sharyn's work has not gone unnoticed. In 2008, she won CP's first Volunteer of the Year award for

helping Arbroath & Carnoustie Adoption Centre find homes for an impressive 350 cats and kittens in 2007. At the same ceremony, she also received the Extra Mile accolade for helping neighbouring branches.

The charity praised Sharyn for having "all the ideal qualities that Cats Protection appreciates in a volunteer – hard work, team spirit and a strong commitment to giving unwanted cats a second chance in life".

She almost turned down the award. "I found it difficult to accept because we're a team here."

Still, when pressed about her proudest achievements, she mentions her part in building up branch co-operation in north-east Scotland. "That's been really good and the cats have gained from it. It relieves a lot of problems."

Sharyn also says the centre has changed "since the early days when this place was just a few pens dotted about and a shed, to what I think is quite a professional set up now". Characteristically, she adds: "But I couldn't have done it without everyone else doing it too." ●

## Sharyn's seven-day schedule

Being a Co-ordinator is an all-encompassing role says Sharyn; even on her free days she'll often end up on CP tasks. "If the phone rings at home my husband shouts miaow," she adds.

### Monday

**Morning:** At home

**Afternoon:** At the centre, takes cats to the vet

**Evening:** Checks centre's voicemail messages from home; prioritises tasks and delegates to volunteers

### Tuesday

**Day:** Volunteers for Citizens Advice Bureau

**Evening:** Checks centre's voicemail messages

### Wednesday

**Morning:** Visits Fife care home that she owns with husband Nick

**Afternoon:** Back at the centre, catching up with volunteers.

**Evening:** Checks centre's voicemail messages

### Thursday

In theory, this is Sharyn's free day, but she often ends up at the centre anyway, catching up with volunteers among other tasks.

**Evening:** Checks voicemail messages

### Friday

At Citizens Advice Bureau all day

**Evening:** Voicemail messages

### Weekend

**Mornings:** Picks up cats that are coming into the centre

**Afternoons:** At the centre for the public opening hours from 2pm-4pm