



Volunteer Rene and Manager Natasha welcome you into the centre



Current pen resident Alfie comes out to say hello

New beginning

Amy Rutter paid a visit to the Homing & Information Centre in Newbury Pets at Home, the first of its kind for Cats Protection

Upon arrival at the Cats Protection Homing & Information Centre, you're immediately struck by the welcoming atmosphere. It could be the inviting sofa area replicating a family living room or it could be the friendly staff and volunteers who greet you with warm smiles.

The centre opened in a Pets at Home store in Newbury, Berkshire in April 2014. We've had a relationship with Pets at Home for eight years. In this pilot project, which follows in the footsteps of a number of other animal welfare charities, Pets at Home provided us with space for our Homing & Information Centre in the store for free, while Support Adoption For Pets, their adoption charity, paid for its construction. Working with a company such as Pets at Home, which has a footfall of several thousand people per week in each store, the aim is to find more homes for unwanted and abandoned cats, raise vital funds and educate a wider audience about responsible cat ownership.

Cats Protection's Chief Executive Peter Hepburn visited the centre in the summer and described it as "better than brilliant". The figures paint a similar picture: at the time of going to print, the centre had homed 56 cats and received around 5,000 visitors.

A home from home

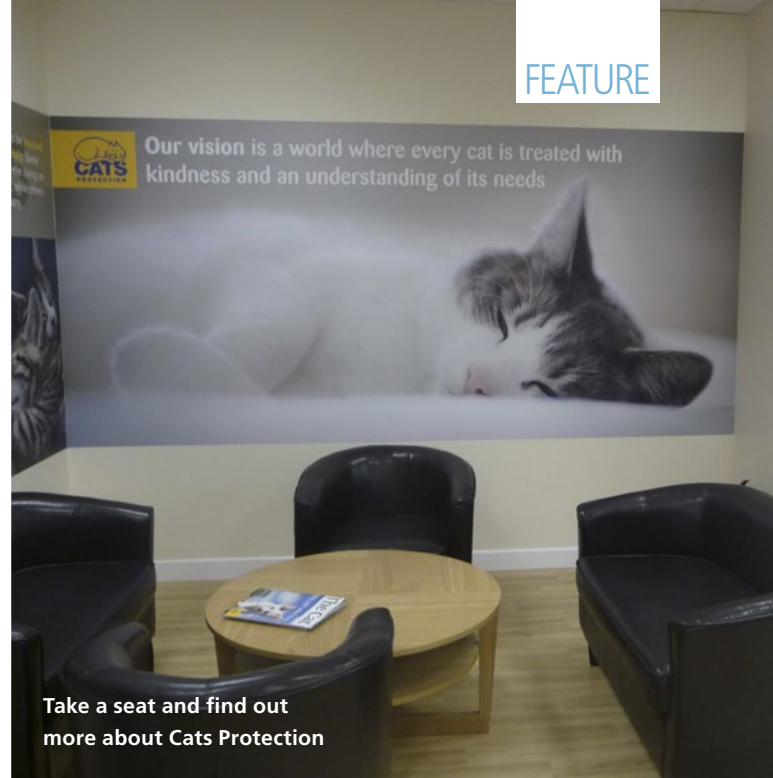
The centre is set in a specially designated area at the back of the store, minimising stress to the cats. It boasts three large pens which have been custom-built to our welfare standards – they are similar to wet rooms which can be easily cleaned from floor to ceiling between feline residents. The space allows staff, volunteers and potential adopters to easily move around to socialise with the cats, while the locations of the pens mean the cats cannot see, hear or smell their neighbours, allowing for a less stressful environment.

There's also a comfortable seating area where people can come in to find out more about the cats ready for adoption or simply ask our trained staff and volunteers questions about caring for their own pets.

Seven volunteers assist the Centre Manager, Natasha Tarrant. Together with the Newbury Adoption Centre Manager, Natasha chooses which 'ready-to-home' cats are transferred to the Homing & Information Centre. They often select those that



Taking calls from the public



Take a seat and find out more about Cats Protection

gs at Newbury

are harder to home or those that have been in our care for longer, as they are adopted so quickly here.

"The more difficult-to-home cats settle better in these pens," Natasha says. "Pixie was in the Weston-super Mare Branch for six months prior to coming here. He was overweight and had behavioural issues which were making it difficult for him to be rehomed." Natasha introduced him to enrichment toys which helped him to lose weight and stop him being bored. He was rehomed after 14 days. "It took us longer than it would normally take from here just to make sure we got the right home." On average, cats at the Homing & Information Centre are only in our care for four days before finding a new home.

Going from strength to strength

After we first announced the opening of the Homing & Information Centre as a trial project, some people expressed concern that it might encourage customers to adopt a cat on impulse. That's simply not the case. Potential adopters go through the same process as they would if adopting from our Newbury Adoption Centre and the welfare of the cats in our care is of the utmost importance.

When someone registers an interest in homing a cat, we make sure that the cat is right for that person, their family, home, lifestyle and plans for the future.

The cat is reserved and there is a 24-hour period before an appointment for collection is arranged.

Natasha says "The response here has been remarkable". Volunteer Rene Pike adds: "People walk in and can see how nice it is and how relaxed the cats are."

There's been lots of local support too: the centre as yet hasn't needed to buy any cat food as it has all been donated by supporters. Lots of people wander in to ask questions about cat care and during my visit Rene was taking a call about neutering and offering advice and information. They also ran education workshops over the summer holidays which worked really well: "The store had a different animal theme each day and every Thursday it was cats," Natasha tells me. "We had around 12 children on each talk ranging from four up to 12, but actually the parents really learned a lot too!"

In the future, Natasha hopes to make the centre a knowledge base for all things feline. Conscious that cat owners often have general cat care queries, which may not warrant a trip to the vet, she's spotted a gap for an additional service from Cats Protection. "We'd like to offer dedicated 1-2-1 education talks with people," she says. It's an innovative idea that can only help the centre to succeed further. ●