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COMMUNITY CASE REPORT

Optimising Shelter Outcomes Using Technology, Foster Care and External Networks: A Community Case Study of Community-Centred Adoptions in an Australian Cat Shelter

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Abstract

This study presents an initial in-depth analysis of foster-led adoptions via a digital platform in an Australian shelter context, where adoptions have traditionally occurred on-site. COVID-19 prompted the development of new adoption initiatives that complied with restrictive government guidelines. Between 2018 and 2024, shelter-based adoptions (n = 30,292) reduced from 80 to 60%, with adoptions through foster care, pet shops and community engagement becoming increasingly important. Growth in foster-based and pet shop adoptions supported shelter operations, accelerating the introduction of new services. Incorporating Adopets®, a digital platform compatible with Shelter BuddyPro® and relatively new to Australia, streamlined remote adoption processes, eliminated the need for in-person visits and reduced adoption barriers, notably decision fatigue. Following its implementation, off-site adoptions doubled compared to pre-pandemic levels, peaking at 40% (n = 13,713), with foster care consistently outperforming pet shop placements. In 2023, the median on-site stay for cats and kittens was 6 days and 28 days for those in foster care. In 2024, despite a 467-animal increase in intake, the median shelter stay dropped to 5 days and 24 days for those in foster care. These results highlight how incorporating technology-enabled strategies offer a replicable framework for community-centred, scalable shelter operations in Australian shelters.

Keywords: *animal shelter*; *Australia*; *community engagement*; *COVID-19 pandemic*; *foster care*; *off-site adoption*; *technology driven solutions*

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This study presents the first known longitudinal analysis of a digitally supported, foster-led adoption programme in an Australian shelter, evaluating whether entrusting adoption authority to trained foster carers can improve outcomes for harder-to-place animals (such as those animals with extended lengths of stay (LOS), reduce LOS and enhance operational capacity. Drawing on 7 years of data from Cat Haven (CH), one of Australia's largest urban cat shelters, this study examines a decentralised adoption model supported by Adopets®,[1] a U.S.-based cloud platform that automates workflows and facilitates off-site placements. Specifically, it investigates whether empowering foster carers to complete adoptions off-site can improve adoption rates and enhance organisational efficiency within the Australian sheltering sector.

Australian shelters have traditionally relied on centralised, in-shelter adoptions shaped by long standing risk-averse employee attitudes towards adopter suitability. Despite global momentum towards more flexible rehoming models, there is limited empirical data evaluating their implementation or outcomes within the Australian context. Using CH's 7 years of operational data, this study addresses a critical gap by evaluating whether experienced foster carers, empowered to complete adoptions remotely, can achieve measurable gains.

Despite national progress, approximately 33% of cats entering Australian shelters and pounds are still euthanised, with an estimated 50,000 healthy and adoptable cats euthanised annually.[1] These historic systems may unintentionally exclude prospective adopters through logistical, cultural, or socioeconomic barriers, thereby prolonging LOS and limiting placement opportunities for the more challenging cases such as older cats.[2–4]

COVID-19 acted as a catalyst for adoption reform. Public health restrictions forced shelters to rapidly reconfigure operations, with foster homes and pet shops becoming primary rehoming venues. The integration of Adopets® during this period enabled foster carers to

1 Adopets(R) ® Pet Loyalty Inc, 1 Washington Mall #1281, Boston, MA 02108 United States. support@petloyalty.com.

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directly finalise adoptions, transforming their role into that of empowered rehoming agents. A strategic partnership with a pet shop chain facilitated the transfer of animals suited to public environments, offering increased visibility and convenient rehoming opportunities. Alternatively, foster homes provided low-stress environments conducive to the rehabilitation and successful placement of timid or behaviourally challenged cats.[5,6]

Additionally, this model relieved pressure on shelter capacity, minimised decision fatigue and disease transmission risk, and redirected staff resources towards high-priority services, such as dental procedures and crisis boarding. It also extended the shelter's reach into culturally and geographically diverse communities, enhancing inclusivity and access.[2,3]

This research demonstrates that decentralised, digitally enabled foster-led adoption models offer scalable, humane and effective solutions to the complex challenges of Australian sheltering, supporting a paradigm shift towards more flexible and inclusive rehoming practices.

Background

Shelter profile

Established in Perth, Western Australia in 1961, CH is an open-admission, not-for-profit cat-only shelter and one of the largest in Australia. Serving an urban and peri-urban population of approximately 2.4 million residents, the shelter's annual intake has remained consistent at around 8,000 cats and kittens for over two decades.[7] Operations are sustained through fundraising, public donations, and service revenue, with only 3% of funding provided by the State Government.

Shelter services include veterinary care, boarding (emergency and domestic violence), cat rescue services and adoption programmes across Perth's metropolitan and surrounding regions. Over the past 16 years, euthanasia rates have markedly decreased, dropping from 67 to 9% by 2024, with no euthanasia performed on healthy, treatable, or rehomeable cats.

Historical adoption practices and limitations

In response to legislative reforms introduced in the late 2010s encouraging pet shops to partner with approved shelters or rescue groups rather than source animals from commercial breeders, CH formalised agreements with a metropolitan pet shop chain. This shift redirected the retail model towards the rehoming of homeless animals and reinforced ethically grounded adoption practices. The arrangement facilitated off-site placements beyond the shelter, with pet shops proving particularly successful for kitten adoptions. While a limited number of well-socialised adult cats were also placed, overall adoption outcomes were markedly higher for kittens in these retail environments.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the predominant adoption model was on-site, accounting for approximately 80% of all adoptions. Foster care was primarily reserved for animals requiring specialised attention, including underweight kittens, those recovering from illness or surgery, and individuals with behavioural challenges. Although this reliance on centralised adoption was considered effective at the time, it contributed to overcrowding, prolonged LOS, elevated disease transmission risks, and limited accessibility for regionally based prospective adopters.

Pandemic related transformation

The pandemic prompted a paradigm shift in adoption practices. Australian animal welfare services were classified as an essential service and could continue operations under restrictive public health guidelines. In response, CH rapidly expanded its foster care programme, community engagement and pet shop adoptions to accommodate animals off-site, mitigating the risks associated with in-shelter overcrowding. Initially, foster care emerged as the primary alternative pathway, with pet store adoptions increasing in importance from 2022 as COVID-19 trading restrictions eased.

To support these efforts and enhance adoption accessibility, CH implemented Adopets® in 2020, a digital platform compatible with Shelter Buddy Pro®[2] (SBP), to facilitate remote adoption processing for foster care animals. This transition reduced reliance on in-person interactions, aligning with mandated public health and operational needs. While pet shops continued to utilise their own in-house systems, CH introduced Adopets® together with comprehensive staff and volunteer training in 2020. This was associated with a twofold increase in off-site adoptions via foster care and to a lesser extent, pet stores compared to pre-pandemic levels. This transition ensured operational continuity during the pandemic while introducing a more flexible, technology-enabled adoption model that continues to support improved animal welfare outcomes today.

Methods

This study analysed cat and kitten adoption data from CH's SBP database, a shelter-specific software programme, over a 7-year period (January 2018 – December 2024), encompassing 44,005 adoptions. Of these, 43% (n = 18,884) were cats, and 57% (n = 24,121) were kittens. Animals available for adoption included both owner surrenders and unowned animals. Age classification was determined using dental eruption, with individuals exhibiting erupted adult canines classified as cats (≥6 months old) and those without as kittens (<6 months old).

2 Shelter Buddy Pro ® Pet Loyalty, Level 1, 241 Adelaide St, Suite #1021, Brisbane, Qld 4000, AU. https://www.shelterbuddy.com/features.

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Since implementing SBP in 2013, adoption data were entered manually by adoption counsellors at the time of adoption. In 2020, Adopets® integration facilitated direct digital entry for foster-based adoptions. Data were then exported to Excel (Microsoft 365) for comparison and analysis to examine adoption trends across the study period.

Adoption pathways and processes

Adoptions were categorised into three primary pathways: shelter-based, foster care and pet shop placements. Adoption trends varied across three distinct periods: pre-pandemic (2018–2019), pandemic (2020–2021) and post-pandemic (2022–2024). Prior to COVID-19, 77% of adoptions occurred at the shelter, with 15% through pet stores and 8% via foster care (Table 1). During the pandemic, public health restrictions prompted a shift towards foster care and pet shop adoptions, with modified procedures to accommodate social distancing. By the post-pandemic period, all three pathways were fully operational and contributed to adoption outcomes.

On-site shelter adoptions

Shelter-based adoptions before the pandemic involved in-person visits, with adopters selecting animals on-site and completing paperwork with the assistance of an Adoption Counsellor. During the pandemic, restricted shelter adoptions were conducted by appointment only, incorporating strict public health measures such as social distancing, mask mandates and contactless document handling. These restrictions were lifted by 2023 and walk-in adoptions resumed.

Foster care adoptions

Foster care adoptions adapted to pandemic conditions through virtual 'meet and greets' and contactless pickups. Outside lockdowns, appointments were held at the foster carer's home or the shelter, based on carer preference. A two-tiered system was implemented: experienced carers finalised adoptions independently via Adopets®, which automatically updated SBP, while less experienced carers required administrative approval. This decentralised model reduced the need for adopters to visit the shelter, offering a more convenient and personalised experience.

Pet shop adoptions

Pet shops operated independently with adoptions conducted by pet shop staff on-site and completed paperwork collected during routine shelter visits for entry into SBP. Only socially outgoing cats and kittens were selected for this pathway, while more timid animals were prioritised for foster care placement. This structured, tri-channel adoption strategy provided flexibility, ensured continuity of operations during public health disruptions and supported efficient data management and positive adoption outcomes.

Results

An overview of adoption outcomes

During the 7-year study period, CH achieved an average adoption rate of 82%, with 44,005 cats and kittens placed into homes from a total intake of 53,562 animals (Table 1). Kittens accounted for 57% of adoptions while cats comprised 43%. Adoption data reflect only finalised placements and exclude animals on adoption trials. The remaining 9,557 cats and kittens were either awaiting adoption, receiving medical treatment, returned to owners or humanely euthanised due to untreatable conditions. As this study focused on adoption pathways, outcomes for animals not officially adopted were omitted.

Table 1. A summary of total Cat Haven adoptions from the shelter and off-site locations.

Year	Annual intake			Adoptions				
				Shelter	Pet shop	Foster care	Total (%)	
	Cats	Kittens	Total	Total cats and kittens	Total cats and kittens	Total cats and kittens	Cats	Kittens
2018	3,288	5,614	8,902	5,786 (80%)	854 (12%)	565 (8%)	36%	64%
2019	3,309	4,706	8,015	4,766 (73%)	1,154 (18%)	556 (9%)	41%	59%
2020*	3,032	3,720	6,752	4,193 (78%)	440 (8%)	747 (14%)	44%	56%
2021*	3,199	3,956	7,155	4,055 (69%)	622 (11%)	1,205 (20%)	43%	57%
2022	3,408	3,648	7,056	3,377 (57%)	1,153 (19%)	1,460 (24%)	47%	53%
2023	3,567	4,120	7,687	3,720 (60%)	1,095 (17%)	1,404 (23%)	44%	40%
2024	3,836	4,159	7,995	4,395 (64%)	936 (14%)	1,522 (22%)	46%	54%
			53,562	**30,292**	**6,254**	**7,459**		

*Denotes years affected by COVID-19 restrictions.

Changes in adoption trends

A notable shift in adoption trends emerged following the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic (2018–2019), approximately 80% of all adoptions occurred on-site at the shelter, while pet stores and foster care accounted for 12 and 8%, respectively (Table 1). Shelter-based adoptions continued to dominate, averaging 77% of placements. However, following the introduction of the Adopets® digital platform in 2020–2021, off-site adoptions rose significantly – reaching 40% by 2022–2024 – with foster care placements consistently surpassing pet shop adoptions (Fig. 1). During the pandemic period (2020–2021), adoption processes shifted towards foster care and a lesser extent pet store placement as public health restrictions necessitated alternative, contact-minimising approaches. In the post-pandemic period (2022–2024), adoptions were distributed across three primary channels: shelter-based placements, foster care, and pet shops (Table 1; See 'Supplementary Material' for additional information).

Shelter based adoptions

Most cat and kitten adoptions occurred on-site, although the percentage of kitten adoptions at the shelter declined from 65% in 2018 to 56% in 2024. An opposite trend was observed for cats, with on-site shelter adoptions increasing slightly from 35% in 2018 to 44% in 2024. Kitten adoptions consistently exceeded cat adoptions throughout the study.

Foster care adoptions

Overall, both cat and kitten adoptions via foster care placements remained relatively consistent during the study period, ranging from 50% in 2018 to 54% in 2024. This model proved particularly effective for adult cats, with cat adoptions via foster care consistently surpassing kitten adoptions during the study period, highlighting the role of foster care as a vital housing pathway for shelter cats (Figs. 1 and 2).

Pet shop adoptions

Adoptions via pet shops remained steady at 12–14% of total adoptions for most of the study period, except during COVID-19 restrictions when this figure dropped to 4% in 2020 and 9% in 2021 due to trading restrictions. Kitten adoptions through pet shops averaged 16% for the study, with notable increases to 21% in 2019 and 23% during 2022–2023. Cat adoptions via pet shops were consistently lower than kitten adoptions, ranging from 5 to 8% less (Fig. 2).

Impact on shelter operations

The percentage of off-site adoptions (pet shop and foster care combined) increased steadily from 20% in 2018, peaking at 44% in 2022, before dropping slightly to 40% in 2023 and 31% in 2024 (Table 1). This trend underscores the importance of flexible pathway strategies in reducing adoption barriers and improving outcomes.

These findings suggest that foster-led, off-site adoptions are not only feasible at scale but may also outperform traditional methods in placement rates and efficiency, especially in contexts where shelter space and public access are constrained (Fig. 3).

Discussion

A scalable model of community-centred, digitally supported foster care

This case study demonstrates a scalable model of decentralised, digitally supported foster adoption that addresses

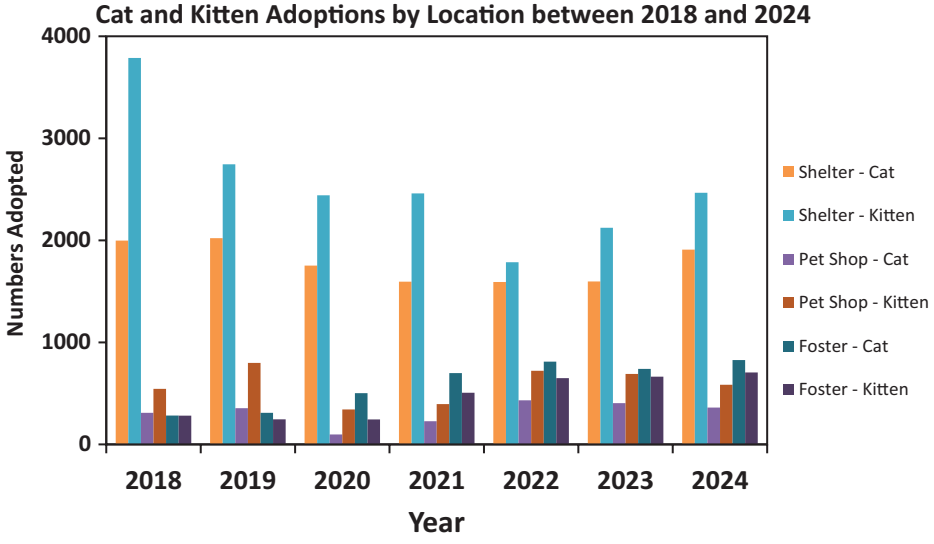

Fig. 1. Cat and kitten adoptions by location between 2018 and 2024.

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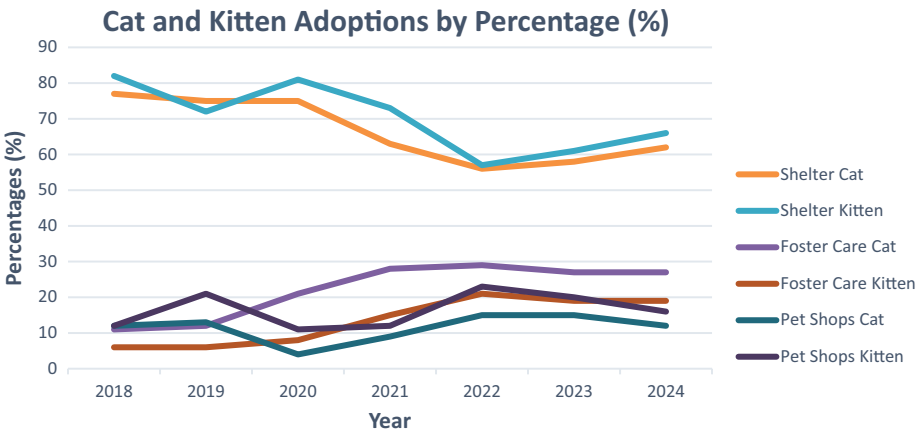

Fig. 2. Cat and kitten adoption numbers by percentage (%).

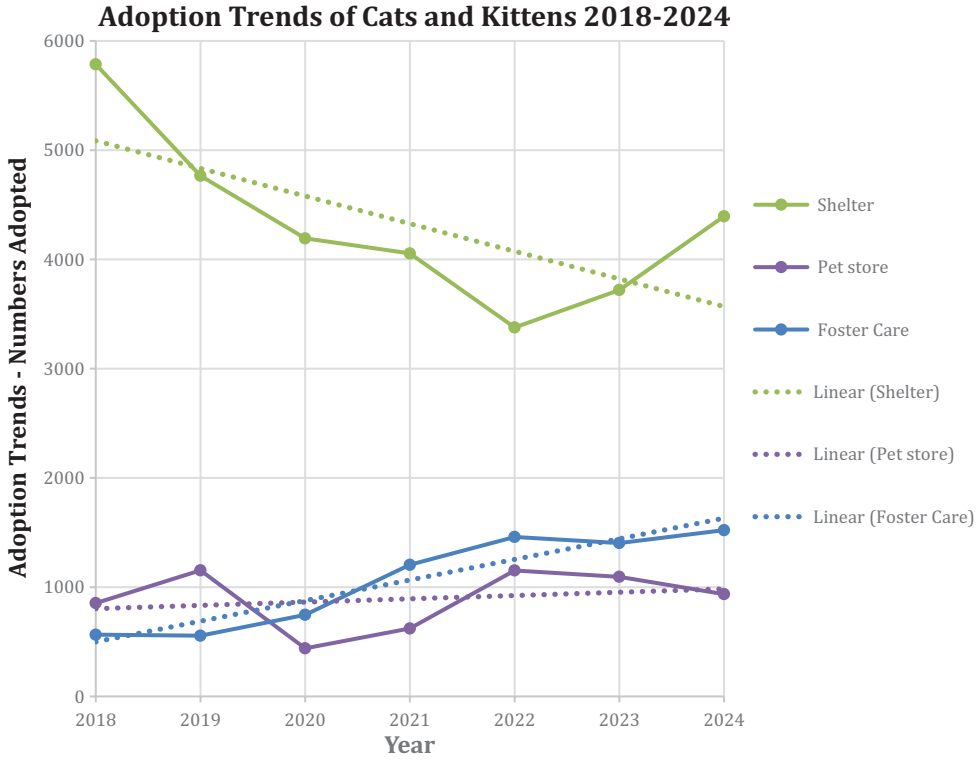

Fig. 3. Cat Haven adoption trends of cats and kittens 2018–2024.

longstanding challenges in Australian animal shelters, suggesting a paradigm shift in how Australian shelters can operate within a Capacity for Care (C4C) framework. While off-site adoption programmes are increasingly recognised internationally for their ability to improve placement rates and shelter capacity, there is a dearth of peer-reviewed literature detailing their implementation and effectiveness in Australia. This study reviews alternative adoption pathways, outcomes, and operational implications, offering critical insights for Australian shelters aiming to enhance rehoming success.

A key innovation was the introduction of Adopets®, a digital adoption management platform. Although Adopets® is used in the United States, its use is relatively new in Australia. It streamlined workflows, reduced administrative burden and facilitated remote approvals, crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the shift to decentralised care. Adopets® integrated seamlessly with the existing shelter system to manage applications, provide counselling, approve contracts, collect payments and coordinate pet pick-up. This foster care model transformation yielded cost savings enabling veterinary staff to

focus on sterilisation and complex, high-needs care, supporting the expansion of dental and emergency boarding services. Therefore, gaining deeper insight into the role of digital platforms and empowering foster carers may assist Australian shelters in modernising and broadening their rehoming approaches.

Foster care as a health and capacity strategy

A critical factor influencing the success of foster and adoption programmes is the diverse sources of animals entering shelters.[1,6] Many animals require foster care before adoption due to their circumstances at intake, including those arriving as strays, council impounds, owner surrenders, adopted returns, shelter-born offspring, emergency boarding cases and transfers from other rescue organisations.[3] Addressing the unique needs of these diverse populations through tailored pathway strategies is essential for optimising shelter capacity and improving outcomes.

Foster care played a critical role in reducing shelter over-crowding and disease risk by relocating vulnerable animals into homes.[1,6,8,9,10] Placements were primarily used for animals requiring behavioural or medical support, including nursing queens, orphaned litters and kittens with upper respiratory infections (known as Cat Flu in Australia) or ringworm. This approach not only improved health outcomes but also reduced shelter-acquired illness and euthanasia risk. Our outcomes align with those of Karsten who found foster care to be effective in improving health, sociability and adoptability by better matching adopter preferences, while Berliner linked it to reduced fearfulness and increased growth in kittens that decreased the likelihood of euthanasia for both cats and kittens.[6,11]

During the study, 17% of all CH's adoptions occurred directly from foster care. Traditionally harder to place, adult cats accounted for 32% of off-site placements and 13% of total adoptions during the study period. Over the same timeframe, overall cat adoptions increased from 36% in 2018 to 46% in 2024, suggesting not only improved accessibility and community reach but also the effectiveness of behavioural support and rehabilitation initiatives (Table 1).

Our findings support those of Kerr, who documented a substantial shift in shelter outcomes following the expansion of foster care programmes at a Queensland shelter where the number of cats placed into foster care doubled over 5 years.[5] During the same period, total euthanasia of adult cats decreased by 43% and behaviour-related euthanasia declined by 85%. These improvements coincided with a doubling of adult cat adoptions compared to the preceding 5-year period, underscoring the transformative impact of foster-based strategies on shelter performance and live outcomes.[5]

Progress in reducing LOS was also evident during our study period. In 2023, 7,687 cats and kittens were admitted with a median on-site LOS of 6 days and cumulative LOS spent in foster care of 28 days. In 2024, despite a 6% intake increase (8,158 cats and kittens), median shelter LOS decreased to 5 days and cumulative foster care LOS to 24 days. Although on-site LOS remained shorter, likely due to the high volume of kitten adoptions, foster care also achieved a meaningful reduction in LOS over time, despite caring for animals with more complex behavioural or medical needs. These figures outperform national averages where median LOS is often much longer, reinforcing the operational efficiency of decentralised models.[5] This aligns with observations by Phillips who states that foster care is often associated with longer stays in the organisation's care than those residing solely in the shelter awaiting adoption.[12] Phillips suggests this discrepancy may stem from reduced visibility of foster animals to potential adopters compared to those located in shelters with in-person visits. These potential disparities highlight the vital role of digital shelter promotion, carers' local networks together with active promotion to ensure timely adoptions through community-focused foster care.

Building and supporting a skilled foster network

Over the study period, 911 foster carers participated, ranging from one-time volunteers to highly engaged, recurring carers. This variation reflects international findings. Taraciuk documented similar caregiver engagement patterns in a Brazilian study.[13] Within our cohort, some carers developed specialised skills in neonatal, infectious disease, complex or chronic case management, further strengthening the programme. These capabilities enabled the programme to support animals who might otherwise have faced euthanasia and to introduce services such as emergency boarding and advanced medical care.

Training played a crucial role in the programme's success. In line with Karsten's findings, carers received instruction in infection control and treatment protocols, improving outcomes for high-risk animals.[6] Carers also contributed nuanced behavioural insights that helped shelters match animals with suitable adopters and improve placement retention. Our data support Kerr's assertion that foster care aids in behavioural rehabilitation and adoption, especially for animals once considered unadoptable.[5] These results underscore the importance of investing in foster carer training and support as a strategy for improving both welfare outcomes and organisational capacity.

COVID-19 necessitated new operational measures including contactless handovers, virtual training and telemedicine, all of which were retained post-pandemic. These practices enhanced infection control with demonstrated long-term value. Consistent with Reese's findings, shelters

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that provided carers with adequate support improved both carer wellbeing and programme retention.[14] Additionally, long-standing experienced carers in our programme were authorised to approve adoptions independently, streamlining processes and improving adopter satisfaction.

Increasing accessibility and community-centric engagement

Decentralising adoption authority reflects a broader shift towards community-based, inclusive and responsive care models aligned with One Welfare and C4C frameworks. In Perth's metropolitan region, foster carers, many from culturally diverse backgrounds, facilitated adoptions within their local networks. This broadened the shelter's reach, especially to individuals who were previously unaware of, or unable to access, shelter-based programmes, which had previously limited fostering and adoptions. These findings are in parallel to reports from Los Angeles County, where McDonald identified language barriers as a key limitation to foster care and adoption in non-English-speaking communities, highlighting the importance of engaging language-diverse carers to promote inclusivity and improve community participation.[15]

Positioning foster carers as community ambassadors improves programme reach and inclusivity.[16] As Phillips notes, these decentralised models can accelerate placements, build local trust and empower carers to take on a more meaningful role in rehoming.[12] Prior to COVID-19, all adoptions occurred on-site, creating logistical barriers and potential decision fatigue for potential adopters. Transitioning to decentralised adoptions reduced these barriers, reinforcing the value of flexible, community-based adoption pathways as also previously noted by Phillips.[12]

Our study observed a steady increase in off-site adoptions from 20% in 2018 to 40% in 2023, reflecting the growing role of foster care and pet shops as effective alternatives to in-shelter placements (Table 1). This trend aligns with Gunter's findings in an Irish study, where dogs adopted directly from foster homes tended to have a shorter LOS than if they were required to return to the shelter for adoption.[17] Though the Irish study focused on dogs, similar patterns emerged in our feline cohort, suggesting this model's broader applicability. Consistent cross-jurisdictional findings from our study and those of Griffen and Kerr underscore the scalability of foster-based adoption strategies.[5,18] These decentralised, foster care-facilitated adoptions leveraged carers' knowledge to improve adopter matching and accelerate placements, as evidenced by the reduced LOS.[18]

In our cohort, animals adopted off-site were typically desexed, vaccinated and microchipped prior to placement, facilitating a direct transition into adoptive homes. Kittens, however, often required return visits to the shelter for completion of age-specific veterinary procedures. This likely contributed to persistently higher in-shelter adoption rates for kittens relative to adult cats throughout the study period.

Showcasing animals in foster homes and pet shops online increased visibility and adoption opportunities while generating community engagement, donations and volunteer interest. Foster carers provided personalised insights into animal behaviour, enabling better adoption matches and reducing cognitive overload and decision fatigue common in shelter environments.[6] Ly and Phillips suggest, as adoption practices evolve, some shelter staff motivated by a commitment to achieving 'ideal homes', may remain cautious about encouraging less conventional, newer approaches.[2,19,20] However, evidence suggests that well-supported, flexible pathways not only reduce LOS but also improve overall adoption outcomes. In our study, increasing off-site adoptions not only improved adopter satisfaction and programme outcomes but also helped alleviate staff concerns about decentralised adoption processes.

Optimising resources enabled CH to expand services such as dental care and emergency boarding while dedicating veterinary staff to spay-neuter surgeries and advanced procedures. Adopets® improved shelter operations, user experience, supported data-driven decision-making and programme adjustments to maximise their adoption success.

This case study demonstrates how Australian shelters can modernise adoption pathways by leveraging community-based foster networks and digital infrastructure. Foster carers improved outcomes for vulnerable animals, reduced LOS and broadened shelter reach. Digital platforms such as Adopets® enabled these transitions, supporting decentralised decision-making, real-time programme evaluation and efficient service delivery. The combination of inclusive community engagement, trust in volunteer foster carers and the use of adaptable digital platforms offers a scalable and sustainable approach to strengthening adoption outcomes and building operational resilience within the Australian sheltering system.

Study's limitations

This study was limited by the availability and accuracy of historical data, which depended on consistent input into SBP and Adopets® platforms. As the study focused on a single high-intake shelter, findings may not be readily extrapolated to smaller or resource-limited shelters. The lack of standardised metrics across Australian shelters and limited peer-reviewed research on off-site adoption models in the country restricted broader comparisons. Furthermore, while the positive impact of digital platforms like Adopets® was observed, the platform remains underutilised in Australia, and its effectiveness may vary based on local adoption practices and technological

infrastructure. Finally, the impact of external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic may have influenced adoption trends and programme adaptations in ways not fully captured by the study.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates the transformative potential of a scalable, community-centric and digitally supported foster care model in modernising Australian shelter operations. By decentralising adoption processes and leveraging platforms such as Adopets®, the programme addressed long-standing challenges, particularly for adult cats and animals with medical or behavioural needs.

Between 2018 and 2024, shelter-based adoptions declined from 80 to 60%, while foster care and community placements became increasingly vital. In parallel, partnering with pet shops provided a consistent, high-visibility outlet for rehoming suitable animals, further increasing adoption opportunities. Adopets®, a digital platform compatible with Shelter BuddyPro® and relatively new to Australia, streamlined remote adoptions by eliminating the need for in-person shelter visits. Off-site adoptions subsequently doubled, peaking at 40%, with foster care consistently outperforming pet shop placements. In 2024, despite an increase of 467 animals in intake, the median length of stay dropped for animals in both shelter and foster care settings.

These outcomes reflect more than technological advancement, signalling a philosophical shift towards decentralised, community-centric care. Foster carers were repositioned as adoption agents, extending the shelter's outreach opportunities.

Efficiencies gained through these placement pathways enabled cost savings and resource reallocation towards high-impact services such as dental procedures, emergency boarding and advanced veterinary care. These results align with international evidence and highlight the potential for scalable, sustainable improvements across the Australian sector.

Yet, despite global momentum, Australian research documenting community-centric adoption models remains limited. This study is the first to detail such a model in practice, contributing to a key gap in current literature. It offers a forward-looking, replicable blueprint that integrates technology, empowered volunteers and welfare-focused care to support shelter resilience, drive sector innovation and strengthen community connections.

Authors' contributions

Study design, original draft preparation, writing and editing – Ann Enright; review and editing – Laura Stapleton. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Authors' notes

Information presented in this manuscript has not been covered in a public forum, poster, abstract, preprint or thesis.

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