

SPECIAL ARTICLE

Cat friendly principles for those working with unowned cats

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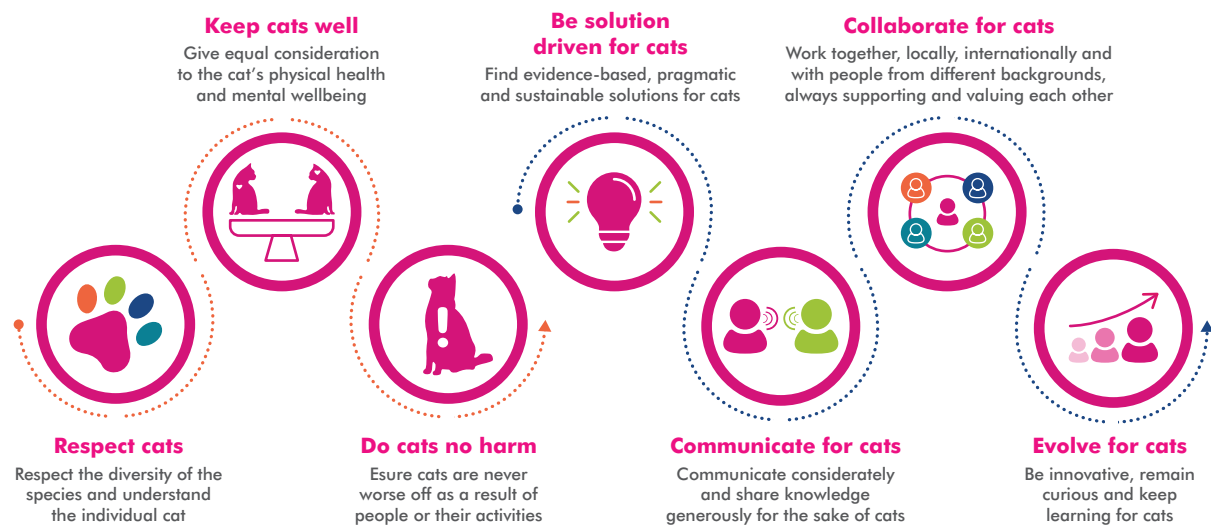
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All iCatCare's work over the years has been underpinned by an ethos articulated as the Cat Friendly Principles (Figure 1). There are seven principles in total – three dedicated to the cat, and four related to ways of working with cats and each other to champion cat welfare. When 'iCatCare' refers to being 'Cat Friendly', this means embracing all of the seven principles.

There is no hierarchy to the principles – they all carry equal weight. In this article each of the seven principles will be introduced and contextualised to the unowned cat sector (homing, Trap-Neuter-Return [TNR] and cat population management organisations), demonstrating how they form the foundation for Cat Friendly Solutions for Unowned Cats and Cat Friendly Homing. For more information on these iCatCare initiatives, see <https://icatcare.org/unowned-cats/>

Cat Friendly Principles



International Cat Care is a Registered Charity in England and Wales, Charity No. 1117342

Figure 1. iCatCare's Cat Friendly Principles.

International Cat Care – history

iCatCare was established in 1958 as the Feline Advisory Bureau (FAB) out of a desperate need for a central body to support cat owners and breeders in improving the treatment of their cats. Little was known about feline medicine at the time and cats were treated as if they were small dogs, often to their detriment. FAB recognised the need for more research into feline diseases and, in 1967, was able to fund a post at the University of Bristol in the UK to investigate feline infectious respiratory disease, leading to identification of the flu viruses and development of a vaccine. It funded postgraduate FAB scholars, residents and lecturers to specialise in feline medicine and grow a feline veterinary community in the UK. In addition to funding and sharing feline-specific knowledge, the charity took a firm stance on contentious issues and from

early on began advocating for neutering at around 4 months of age, campaigning against breeding cats with extreme conformation or inherited defects, educating against the scruffing of cats and opposing declawing.

Over time iCatCare has grown and developed its work internationally with the veterinary profession, owners, breeders and those involved in working with cats outside of the veterinary profession (such as in rescue, boarding catteries, grooming and cat sitting). The charity also works with the pharmaceutical, pet nutrition and pet product industries to promote good welfare of cats through improvement of physical health and mental wellbeing.

Since 2009 iCatCare has been actively developing resources and tools to support those working with and for unowned cats.

iCatCare’s cat friendly principles



Respect cats

Respect the diversity of the species and understand the individual cat

Why ‘respect cats’?

- As cats share our homes as companion animals there is a tendency to view them through a human lens and assume that they want and need the same things that we do. This is not the case; they are a species that has very different needs to our own and we can only care for them well if we understand those needs.
- Cats have a unique physiology and behavioural biology; they are
 - Obligate carnivores (with specific nutritional needs which must be met to ensure health)
 - Both predators and prey
 - Not biologically social, but are socially flexible with their own and other species
- All cats have common needs, such as
 - Food and water
 - A safe place to rest, sleep and feel secure
 - Somewhere to toilet
 - Opportunities to communicate through scratching and facial rubbing
 - Opportunities for predatory behaviours (even if it is through play)
- Within the species there is great diversity in terms of temperament and behaviour. The individuality of cats comes from an interplay between
 - Genetics (parents and breed lineage)
 - The mother’s physical health and mental wellbeing during pregnancy
 - The cat’s experiences, particularly during the first two months of life
- Other factors, including life stage (Figure 2), health, reproductive status and stress, for example, impact on the behaviour of the individual

international cat care How old is your cat?

Life stage	Age of cat	Human equivalent age
 Kitten Birth – 6 months	0–1 months	0–1 years
	2 months	2 years
	3 months	4 years
	4 months	6 years
	5 months	8 years
	6 months	10 years
 Junior 7 months – 2 years	7 months	12 years
	12 months	15 years
	18 months	21 years
	2 years	24 years
 Adult 3 – 6 years	3 years	28 years
	4 years	32 years
	6 years	40 years
 Mature 7 – 10 years	7 years	44 years
	8 years	48 years
	9 years	52 years
	10 years	56 years
 Senior 11 – 14 years	11 years	60 years
	12 years	64 years
	13 years	68 years
	14 years	72 years
 Super Senior 15 years +	15 years	76 years
	16 years	80 years
	17 years	84 years
	18 years	88 years
	19 years	92 years
	20 years	96 years
	21 years	100 years
	22 years	104 years
	23 years	108 years
	24 years	112 years
	25 years	116 years



Official Partners of the Cat Friendly Clinic Programme:



Figure 2. Cat lifestages.

- Cats can be better understood if considered on a lifestyle spectrum (Figure 3) based on
 - Whether the cat is capable of living happily with people as a pet or, at the other end of the spectrum, actively avoids people due to the distress felt in their proximity
 - Whether the cat is adapted to living independently of people, or at the other end of the spectrum, is adapted to life in a domestic home (with or without access outside)

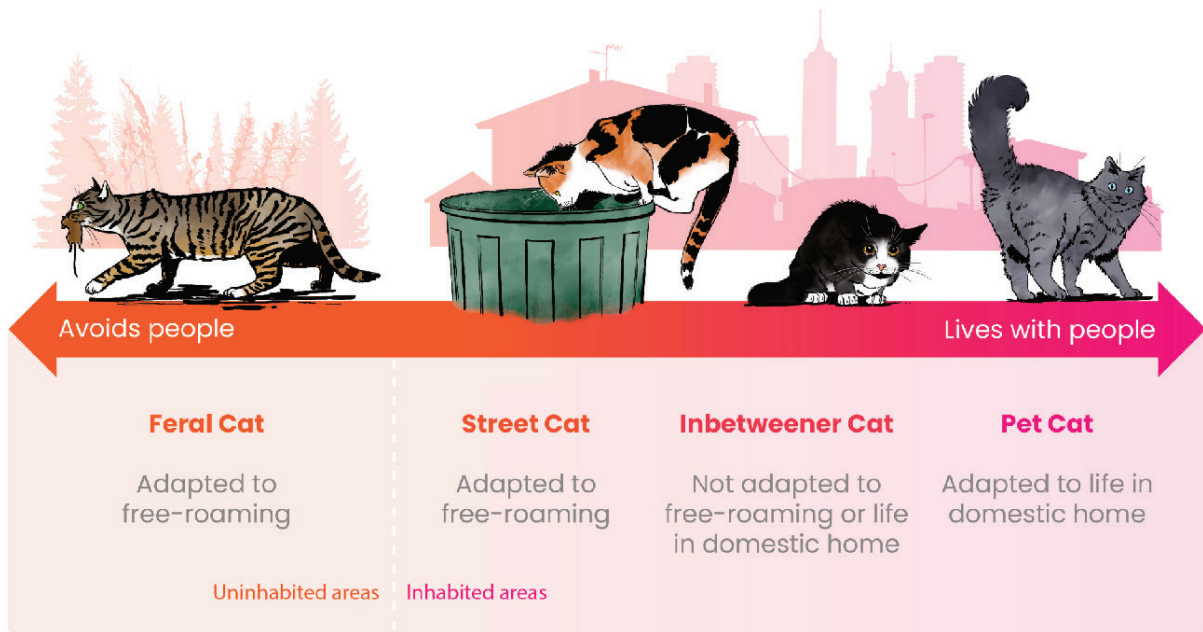


Figure 3. The spectrum of lifestyle of the domestic cat.

- The diversity of behaviours seen in pet cats in response to physical interaction with people can also be viewed as a spectrum (Figure 4)



Figure 4. The spectrum of pet cat response to physical interaction with people.



Keep cats well

Give equal consideration to the cat's physical health and mental wellbeing

Why 'keep cats well'?

- Physical health and mental wellbeing directly impact on each other and shape the cat's living experience
- Keeping cats well involves promoting good health, as well as responding to ill health
- Mental wellbeing includes both the cat's emotional health (how it feels) and cognitive health (how it thinks) – cats are emotional animals and they experience a range of emotions
- A cat's physical health and mental wellbeing are both impacted when
 - It is in pain, physical discomfort, injured or suffering from illness or disease
 - It is in acute or chronic distress



Do cats no harm

Ensure cats are never worse off as a result of people or their activities

Why 'do cats not harm'?

- Cruel, ill-informed or inappropriate handling of, or behaviour towards, cats can cause distress or harm
- Harm can affect the physical health and mental wellbeing of a cat in the short and/or the long-term
- Harm can arise in some cases from too much of something considered positive (e.g. food) as well as from things considered negative (e.g. forceful handling)
- Certain medications and chemicals (even those suitable for other species) may be harmful to cats
- Interactions with cats against their will and those that cause startling, often for the purpose of human amusement, can be emotionally harmful for cats
- Breeding for certain looks can lead to discomfort, pain and behavioural changes, and limited gene pools can encourage the development of inherited disease
- Anthropomorphism (attributing human thoughts and feelings to animals) can improve empathy but may also detract from prioritising the needs of cats
- Harm can be caused by failing to recognise, and act accordingly, when a cat is experiencing
 - Health problems, such as injury or pain
 - Negative emotional states
 - Poor quality of life
- Harm can be caused through a lack of understanding of the consequences of letting cats breed (i.e. not giving due thought to the outcome for the parent animals or resulting kittens)

The final four principles are about people and how they work to champion cat welfare.



Be solution driven for cats

Find evidence-based, pragmatic and sustainable solutions for cats

Why 'be solution driven for cats'?

- Addressing the root causes, rather than symptoms of issues helps to develop effective and sustainable solutions
- Making informed, well-considered decisions, no matter how complex or difficult, promotes good cat welfare. When there is a problem, doing nothing is not a Cat Friendly option
- Seeking evidence to support pragmatic and realistic decisions drives the best outcome for the individual cat's circumstances
- Measuring the impact of any activities allows assessment of success
- Ensuring continuity and longevity of cat welfare activities is important; people can only help if they stay well, physically and mentally, and can maintain the level of work comfortably



Communicate for cats

Communicate respectfully and share knowledge generously for the sake of cats

Why 'communicate for cats'?

- Communicating professionally and considerately with all stakeholders allows good working relationships and promotes sharing of knowledge
- Listening is an integral part of communication, to actively receive and interpret someone else's information and point of view
- Active listening reduces the likelihood of misunderstanding and encourages honesty and trust
- Tailoring communication style, content and means of delivery is an effective way to connect with different stakeholders
- Communicating about successful cat welfare-related collaboration encourages sharing and less 'competition' between organisations and individuals
- Communicating regularly on the same topics can embed learning and boost the impact of messaging
- Adapting language and approach to suit the audience can considerably improve understanding and concordance



Collaborate for cats

Work together for cats, locally, internationally and with people from different backgrounds, always supporting and valuing each other

Why 'collaborate for cats'?

- Collaborating with a range of different stakeholders will bring increased perspectives and insight on cat welfare issues that will result in greater impact
- Working together for common goals strengthens key messages and enhances their dissemination
- Collaborating effectively requires the ability to be comfortable around others who may hold different views and motivations, but still have the capacity to find the common ground and develop mutual understanding and respect for one another
- Understanding different socioeconomic, geographical or ethnic influences can inform understanding, decision-making and effective communication, and make the difference between the success and failure of cat welfare projects



Evolve for cats

Be innovative, embrace new knowledge, remain curious and keep learning for cats

Why 'evolve for cats'?

- Evolving ways of work doesn't mean that things have been done badly in the past, but instead developing knowledge and skills shows commitment to the species and to delivering better results
- Working with cats, in whatever capacity, can be challenging and emotional, and the demands can make it seem like there is no time to review, learn or improve. However, research and expertise are constantly growing, and new learnings may lead to more effective solutions that are worth taking the time to explore
- Learning can come from different sources and multiple disciplines
- Monitoring progress and long-term outcomes establishes how effective interventions can be, and can influence future decision-making
- Sustaining positive messaging and efforts to encourage continual improvement of understanding can help to change negative attitudes to cats in the wider community

Why adopt these cat friendly principles within the unowned cat sector?

It is unlikely that anyone, when viewing these principles, would disagree with their validity as a positive framework upon which to build strategies and goals to improve cat welfare. The adoption and application of these principles however require a dramatic shift in the mindset of many that work in the unowned cat sector. The 'rescue' model that exists within the organisations and individuals who work with and for unowned cats requires a high energy, emergency-focused approach to the work. This

model is reactive and means that the emphasis is placed on 'rescuing' the animals with the inference that the subsequent caging represents a safe haven and a positive outcome, which, of course, it is not. Those attracted to the sector often experience strong emotions relating to cats and see themselves as passionate advocates on a mission to save them. This is, in theory at least, a laudable ambition, but, in reality, decisions made with this mindset are based on emotions therefore rarely well thought through or, worse still, decisions are too distressing to even contemplate so they are not made at all.

There is no doubt that those working in this sector, often unpaid, work extremely hard, but it is frequently in a way that is not sustainable, given the stressful, emotive and pressurised environment they are in. Adopting the Cat Friendly Principles requires a commitment to step back and acknowledge that there may be a better, more sustainable way to provide good cat welfare. The sector would need to commit to further and continuing education and training, without defensiveness or

resistance, towards new and innovative ideas and ways of working. This time commitment, to give people the head space to even contemplate learning, requires the workload to be managed differently in the short term to allow this to happen.

Society, being largely anthropomorphic and sentimental, value animal 'rescue' workers for doing jobs that would be rejected by many, as emotionally and physically draining. As such, the more they are seen to suffer for their cause, the more rewards they get, via donations and voluntary services, thereby enabling the continuation of existing work practices. Adopting and applying the Cat Friendly Principles requires the sector to work towards more strategic and proactive practices that will ultimately professionalise the sector and give it the respect it deserves, for being effective, compassionate and knowledgeable, within the wider companion animal community and beyond. If this took place, whilst acknowledging it is going to be a hard and lengthy journey, the future for unowned cats would look very different.



Respect Cats: What would the future look like if the unowned cat sector followed this Cat Friendly Principle?

Staff and volunteers have been trained to understand the diversity that exists within the species (and common needs applicable to all), allowing them to care for cats knowledgeably and as individuals. They understand what influences how cats experience the world and have learned to recognise positive, negative and neutral responses to people, other cats and their surroundings. As this is better understood, keeping cats in cages for prolonged periods is no longer seen as positive and safe, but as a negative experience to be avoided for the cats. Their needs are prioritised, over what humans perceive to be best for them, to improve welfare, and more individuals and organisations are looking for alternatives to intake into cages, such as foster care, shorter length of stay in care and early, proactive interventions within the community. Responding to the individual's needs also provides more successful long-term outcomes for the cats that come into care.

Cat population management has become more individualised, as people appreciate how different cats have different needs and recognise that free-roaming cats are potentially a mix of those that are owned, unowned, socialised and unsocialised. The sector now knows that cats from different lifestyles within the spectrum, for example street cats and abandoned pet cats, are represented within this dynamic group of cats and that they require different interventions and outcomes.

As well as respecting the diversity among cats in terms of their tolerance of physical interaction with people, the sector understands and respects the individual cat, whether free-roaming or in cages or foster care awaiting adoption. Individuals are assessed at the earliest opportunity, that is before intake, to ensure that cats entering the system are only those suitable to be homed as pets and all other alternatives

to intake have been explored. Once admitted into a homing centre (shelter), respecting the species has encouraged careful consideration about housing in a way that better suits their needs, for example housed separately from dogs, opportunities to hide and routine husbandry and interactions with people are tailored to suit the individual. Equally, cats unsuitable to be pets have been identified quickly and outcomes found that bypass the need to be confined in a homing centre.

The benefits of respecting cats have extended to the cats' adoptive families, as they too respect the diversity that exists and acknowledge that each cat is an individual. Having this understanding means that prospective owners better understand the cats they choose to care for, and make informed decisions based on the cats' needs, as well as considering what would suit the family's lifestyle. Decisions are made carefully; people no longer say 'I want a cat', they now ask 'can I provide the right environment to meet a cat's needs?'

Working with unowned cats, particularly when they are fearful and resistant to handling, is no longer challenging, as veterinary teams are now fully appreciative of the differences that may exist between, for example, a free-roaming street cat and an abandoned pet cat. They tailor their approach accordingly and ensure that they minimise handling and house the cats appropriately (low noise, predictable routines, a place to hide etc), to keep both cats and staff safe. They also appreciate that cats adapted to different lifestyles require very different outcomes, for example a feral or street cat needs to be returned to a free-roaming lifestyle and not be confined in a cage with the intention to 'bring it round' to become somebody's pet.



Keep cats well: What would the future look like if the unowned cat sector followed this Cat Friendly Principle?

Staff and volunteers in homing centres and within foster networks, as well as the veterinary teams that work in partnership with them, recognise and appreciate the significance of both physical and mental suffering, resulting in early identification of cats that are uncomfortable or in distress. Staff and volunteers have developed a holistic approach to health and have the knowledge to act accordingly to relieve that suffering. The negative effects of confining cats in cages for prolonged periods of time are understood and other solutions found, including foster care and keeping cats within their community.

The homing sector appreciates that the design and type of housing, and the husbandry of cats, can cause distress, particularly if cats are housed near each other. Group housing, often including constantly changing individuals within the group as cats are adopted, is no longer common practice and organisations are now, or are working towards, providing either

smaller stable groups in environments with sufficient resources to meet the needs of all the cats, or single housing.

A better understanding of the inter-relatedness of a cat's physical health and mental wellbeing has promoted better protocols for stress management and infectious disease control. Preventive healthcare, such as vaccination and parasite control, is also valued as having a positive impact on current and long-term health and has been incorporated, whenever finances allow, into standard procedures for cats in the care of homing organisations.

Veterinarians, in partnership with the homing organisations, base choice of treatments on the short- and long-term physical and mental impacts on the cat's quality of life and welfare, thereby preventing unnecessary and financially restrictive treatments that are not in the best interests of the individual, considering its ability to cope with such treatment.



Do cats no harm: What would the future look like if the unowned cat sector followed this Cat Friendly Principle?

The sector recognises that, with any intervention however well-meaning, there must be a plan regarding that cat's future outcome to ensure that it isn't worse off as a result. Processes have been put in place that prioritise the needs of the cat, thereby improving welfare-based decision-making. Those decisions are being made in a timely fashion and relate to whether the cat is taken into care, how that cat is cared for and what its eventual preferred outcome would be, to prevent long-term confinement and distress.

An understanding of the species and the individual, coupled with a 'think before you act' culture, has prevented excessive or unwanted handling of cats within homing centres, foster care and during the process of TNR. Attempts to 'socialise' or 'bring round' juveniles and adult cats, without careful

assessment of their suitability to be pets, have stopped in favour of outcomes sympathetic to the individual's adaptive lifestyle. Everyone now knows that, firstly, the sensitive period for socialisation is within the first 2 months of life and, secondly, there is a greater motivation within the sector for cats to lead the lives that best suit their needs.

All stakeholders now consider the impact of their actions with and for cats. For example, population control methods chosen by municipalities/governments are designed with both cat welfare and number stabilisation/reduction in mind and cat owners (and caregivers for free-roaming community cats) understand that neutering cats prevents further additions to the unowned cat population. The suffering that is often associated with increasing numbers no longer occurs.



Be solution driven for cats: What would the future look like if the unowned cat sector followed this Cat Friendly Principle?

People who work with unowned cats continue to be passionate and committed but they now appreciate that there are alternatives to saying 'yes' when it comes to taking cats into care. Consequently, homing organisations have moved away from working at maximum capacity, where all potential spaces for cats are filled and there is no time to step back and review the impact on the welfare of the cats in their care. This has historically led to overcrowding, stressed cats and infectious

disease outbreaks, which in turn results in cats staying in care for long periods. Instead, the sector now works at optimum capacity, allowing staff to become more productive, less stressed and help more cats in the long-term, as they all receive individual care, remain healthy and move through the system quicker to their adoptive homes.

Homing organisations and TNR groups have become more strategic and measure the impact of their work, by

collecting pre- and post intervention data to help them understand local cat populations, and promote strategic and realistic, pragmatic solutions using the resources available to them. Homing organisations take time to address the root causes of problems, rather than just constantly tackling the symptoms, for example, they engage with and support neutering in communities where, every year, there have been many unwanted litters.

Organisations carrying out TNR programmes focus on building resources and capacity to perform 'front-loaded', high volume TNR, which is widely agreed is the most effective strategy for long-term stability and reduction of populations. This involves plans to capture a high percentage of the population in a specific area in a short space

of time and then to return regularly until all are neutered. They appreciate that, if resources and veterinary capacity are limited, they follow this process in a specific area, the size of which is achievable given their circumstances. This is done in conjunction with interventions to address other factors contributing to free-roaming cat populations, such as, failure to neuter pet cats, unrestricted breeding and pet cat abandonment. This multi-faceted long-term strategy has stabilised and reduced cat populations over time and uses the available resources effectively. The unowned cat sector has built an evidence base for successful cat population management which is being used to persuade others to undertake similar programmes aligned to good cat welfare.



Communicate for cats: What would the future look like if the unowned cat sector followed this Cat Friendly Principle?

There is now good communication within the unowned cat sector – internally, externally and between organisations. Homing organisations now prevent cats from coming into the homing system by communicating a range of options, including assistance to keep cats with their existing owners by, for example, offering short-term assistance with food or veterinary bills. Modelling the non-judgemental, empathetic, and respectful attitude associated with good communication skills has meant that members of the community seek help from homing organisations before cat-related problems become emergencies, allowing important decisions to be taken in less pressured circumstances. Homing organisations have built an image of being the trusted expert, meaning that staff and volunteers give ongoing advice to new adopters that is well received and followed,

to ensure that the transition to a new home environment goes smoothly, thereby preventing the risk of an early return to the homing centre. This advice is also being given to pet owners, who are reaching out for support, to enable them to overcome difficulties and keep their cats, rather than relinquish them for adoption.

When working with free-roaming populations, the reputation and credibility of those working with unowned cats is enhanced through communicating positively and professionally with different stakeholders. Resistance to TNR has been reduced by the unowned cat sector understanding the diverse views that exist within the community and by explaining planned activities clearly. Sharing well-formed communications of good cat population management is used to persuade others to try similar approaches.



Collaborate for cats: What would the future look like if the unowned cat sector followed this Cat Friendly Principle?

As organisations collaborate, different individual organisational strengths are identified and combined to provide a cohesive and holistic approach. This allows for the best skills or stronger messaging to be focused where needed, for example, a joint approach on a neutering campaign to tackle overpopulation in an area, by one organisation focusing on TNR and another focusing on providing low-cost neutering for owned cats. Better relationships have developed between cat homing and welfare organisations and other stakeholders, such as local authorities and veterinarians. Communities have worked together to improve local cat welfare, by helping to address issues early and then sharing their approach with others.

When considering international collaboration, approaches are now tailored to local needs and culture. Learning acquired during collaboration within one country or region is being used to support others. As this culture of collaboration, mutual respect and learning has been adopted, people working directly with the cats feel supported in the work they do and valued for the part they play, because all contributions are now seen as integral, vital, and important. This has encouraged more volunteers to become actively involved in managing cat populations and improving cat welfare in general.



Evolve for cats: What would the future look like if the unowned cat sector followed this Cat Friendly Principle?

With continued emphasis on (and enthusiasm for) innovation and acquiring knowledge, homing and cat welfare organisations continue to gain better understanding of cats and apply that knowledge to their care. People are being courageous to try, or embrace, new ways of working, even if it feels foreign or uncomfortable. Old assumptions and ways of working have been reviewed, challenged and changed to improve cat welfare, without a sense of shame or regret that

things were done differently in the past. Outcomes for cats are selected wisely, and people are being creative about solutions, and are monitoring progress in the longer-term to aid continued learning. Personal strengths and areas of interest have been developed and acknowledged in individual members of staff, giving them good job satisfaction. The growing professionalism within the sector has improved career pathways and opportunities.

How can we move towards this vision of the future?

More effective and strategically planned Cat Population Management programmes need to be developed internationally that include a complex network of initiatives beyond just TNR, based on better understanding of population management and dynamics to tackle the continued overpopulation that exists around the world.

Cat owners are finding it increasingly challenging to keep their pet cats fed and healthy. As a result, cats are being relinquished to homing organisations or abandoned on the streets. Access to affordable veterinary services has reduced, and is absent in some parts of the world, leaving many owners without the opportunity to even consider neutering their pets. The unowned cat sector must be robust and work in a sustainable, efficient and cohesive way, together and across organisations and stakeholders, to manage the increasing demands on their services.

It is unrealistic to assume that the imagined future discussed in this article, where Cat Friendly Principles are assimilated into everyday practice, is achievable in anything less than the long-term. It is highly unlikely that everyone currently working within the sector has the capability, opportunity and motivation to change and commence this journey of evolution. However, the resistance in some quarters is not a good enough reason for the majority not to, fearlessly and without prejudice, review practices and commit to change for the sake of cats. The resistance that is seen as a major barrier is often nothing more than a failure in communication or, in many instances, the time hasn't been taken to truly listen and understand the perspective, beliefs and opinions of others.

We must recognise that the only way we can solve the problems of overpopulation and poor cat welfare is through

the actions of people. It is no coincidence that four of the Cat Friendly Principles are directly focused on human behaviour. Applying the Cat Friendly Principles within day-to-day work, and seeing real-time positive outcomes as a result, will lead to an evolution in working practices and attitudes which can only be a good thing for the future of cat welfare. The sector will recognise the benefits to cat welfare of focusing on addressing root problems and causes, rather than the continued fire-fighting that is inevitable when dealing only with symptoms. We cannot predict a future where homing organisations are no longer required, but we can imagine a different, efficient and welfare-focused way of working that puts the cat's true needs front and centre and delivers much greater impact. The unowned cat sector will then be recognised as professional and sustainable, and staff and volunteers will be valued and trained. They will also be supported to manage the inevitable toll that comes from working to address animal welfare challenges.

iCatCare already provides a 20-week online coaching programme for organisations to become Cat Friendly Homing centres and is also developing further opportunities for those working in the unowned cat sector to learn new knowledge and practical skills. There is a comprehensive website, that is regularly updated to reflect new thinking and resources, full of practical information, sourced internally from iCatCare and externally from other reputable international animal welfare organisations, <https://icatcare.org/unowned-cats/>.

Further reading

ISFM'S Cat Friendly Principles for veterinary professionals. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1098612X221128750>