

Speaking up for cats

*Jacqui Cuff, Cats Protection's Advocacy Manager,
explains how she is helping CP get its messages
across to new audiences*



As a former lawyer – and we’re talking 20 years ago – I still recall how important it was to put forward a good case for my client and persuade others to see their point of view.

In many ways that’s what being Advocacy Manager for Cats Protection is all about. Cats can’t speak for themselves (even if they do usually manage to wrap us round their paws!) But we can speak for them.

And as Advocacy Manager I’ve got a wealth of expertise to draw on from across the charity – from our Veterinary and Legal teams to our adoption centres and all our fantastic branches, supporters and volunteers who deal with cats every day. My role is to use that expertise and information to influence others with influence and power who may not value or respect cats as we do.

So who do we need to influence and why?

Many of the problems for cats that we see on the ground relate back in some way to law, policy or enforcement – or more often the lack of it. By speaking up for cats we can maintain a dialogue with government departments, MPs, local government and companies so that, over time, things should improve for cat welfare across the UK. For example, I’m working to try and get animal welfare into the new primary curriculum for science so that the adults of the future understand about responsible pet ownership.

We’ve supported the Charity Retail Association by launching an online “SOS Shops in Wales” campaign to resist cuts to charity shop rate relief. We’re also part of the Pet Advertising Advisory Group (PAAG), seeking to get government support for minimum standards which will improve the content of online adverts selling cats and kittens.

I have a contact list of over 150 MPs, MSPs in Scotland, Welsh and Northern Ireland Assembly Members who’ve all shown themselves to be sympathetic to cats, and I’ve been getting in contact with them about our work. Many were happy to support our early neutering campaign and when notified about National Black Cat Day several MPs told me about their own much-loved black cats!

Local authority officers and councillors are also important allies for us, especially where there are local issues such as multi-cat households and unneutered colonies of strays and ferals. Only by being persuasive and working in partnership are we going to get councils and housing officers to help us control cat populations.

Last year, I spoke to Birmingham North Branch about local advocacy to address large cat colonies and even got the opportunity to try things first hand. I helped the branch’s Welfare Officer Shaki McFarland trap a mother and three kittens, which were all rehomed!

This year, I’m working with our Neutering Manager to support targeted neutering which will involve partnership campaigns in some of our major cities.

As well as government there are other companies and organisations we may want to influence on something specific. With other members of the Cat Group –

a collection of professional organisations dedicated to feline welfare – we wrote to leading supermarkets about lily flower sales. Most, but not all, now label cut lily bouquets with a warning of the toxicity of lilies to cats. We are chasing up those supermarkets that don’t.

What do we want to achieve?

One of my underlying aims is to make sure cats are not forgotten by decision makers. Cats can be seen by some policymakers as not needing protection – invisible, somewhat independent creatures that can almost look after themselves. This is, to some extent, true of course and that’s why we love them! My cat has been known to go on an unauthorised walkabout, returning two days later!

But despite their independence, cats really do need to be protected by law. At present, there is very little in place with the major exception of the Animal Welfare Act (2006) and its Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland equivalents. CP had hoped for a range of regulations under that Act – for example measures to tackle out-of-date laws on pet shop sales and the commercial breeding and selling of cats. Current provisions don’t reflect the current realities and certainly not the massive internet trade in cats and kittens that now exists. As we move towards the 2015 general election these are all manifesto asks I’ll be raising. You never know, cat cuddling could be the new MP photo opportunity alongside babies!

More than meetings and letters!

A lot of my work is about writing letters and emails, going to meetings and networking – building up those contacts with influential organisations and individuals. But in this digital age I can often reach far more people through CP’s social media presence – we have more than 112,000 followers on Facebook and Twitter combined.

Many MPs now tweet as a matter of routine and if we can persuade just a few to retweet our messages then the word will soon spread and spread – ‘let’s go viral’ as they say. And as long as our messages are evidence based and well-reasoned then the digital world can be good for cats. So, you Tweeters and Facebookers – prepare to be called on! ▶



Jacqui with
Belfast East MP
Naomi Long
(foreground)
and CP staff

All across the UK

My advocacy work spans the whole of the UK – so I've had to be realistic and prioritise what I can achieve and where – and I'll need your help. Often, CP will work with other animal welfare charities where an alliance approach may be more powerful. For example, CP is one of 20 charities and organisations that together form the Animal Welfare Education Alliance. The Alliance believes that teaching children about animal welfare from an early age can bring about positive change for animals and help to shape compassionate and responsible citizens of the future.

We are also part of alliances on the National Curriculum, improving internet advertising of pets and on microchipping. Another consideration is timing – government has made it very clear that on some issues, there's unlikely to be any change in the short term. For example, there is no immediate prospect of a ban on the sale of cats in pet shops – so we're tightening up the licensing conditions instead.

Out and about

I've been out and about around the UK a good deal as to be a good advocate you really need to get a feel for the issues on the ground.

Together with CP's Belfast Adoption Centre team, I was delighted to show Naomi Long, MP for Belfast East, around the centre. It was a pleasure to meet her and she is very supportive of our cat care work.

On a recent visit to the Welsh Assembly, I found time to visit Sue Dobbs, Molly Hughes and the team at the Bridgend Adoption Centre. Sue and her team are great local campaigners and often get support from members of the Welsh Assembly.

And when Iain McKenzie, MP for Inverclyde in western Scotland, contacted us it seemed an ideal opportunity to arrange for him to meet with me and Mary Millar, the Branch Co-ordinator of CP's Inverclyde branch. Iain was keen to support the branch in raising awareness about its homing and fundraising activities.

I'm hoping to meet even more of our supporters in 2013. It will be great to be able to call on you for your help as letter writers, petition signers or Tweeters. Look out for opportunities which I'll advertise through the volunteering pages of CP's website (www.cats.org.uk/get-involved). If you are especially interested in advocacy work and want to get in touch then do please contact me at: advocacy@cats.org.uk ●



Visiting Bridgend Adoption Centre manager Sue Dobbs and her dedicated team

Getting cats into care homes

Getting more residential care homes and day centres to accept residents who want to bring in their own cat is a priority for CP and an issue I'll be campaigning on. It's a tragedy if a resident has to leave their cat behind, both for the cat and the owner and means yet another cat in need of rehoming. If a residential home really won't accept residents' cats the next best thing is for them to adopt one for the care home.

Last year, I visited the Woodville Centre run by Richmond Council. It is a daycare centre for referred clients many of whom suffer from varying stages of dementia. Their two gorgeous resident cats Redwood and Oakland are loved by the staff and clients – if either cat enters the room, clients often say hello to the cat first, staff second!

It was great to see the patients at Woodville so enjoying the company of the resident cats Redwood and Oakland who were clearly part of the family.

John (pictured) was among many clients who especially loved the cats – they clearly love John back. The cats were of real comfort to the clients and the home agrees that cats are a real help with conditions such as anxiety and dementia. Both cats are very friendly and can often be found curled up on a chair or being pampered by a resident.



CP's Inverclyde Branch Co-ordinator Mary Millar (left) and Jacqui with Iain McKenzie, MP for Inverclyde in western Scotland



Woodville Centre client John with Jacqui and resident cat Oakland