

Cat chat



Jeanette Greaves, a Publicity Volunteer for Preston Branch spreads the word...

One of the three aims of Cats Protection is to educate and inform the public about cats and, at a branch level, a good way of doing this is to give talks to groups.

Preston Branch has four volunteers who get involved in this side of things. Alan Needham is a retired schoolteacher with an impressive CV of public speaking. He is regularly engaged by community groups to speak about his work with Cats Protection, but even when he is asked to speak on other topics, he kindly donates his fee to our branch. Shirley Chisnall is fantastic at putting larger groups of children at ease, is extremely knowledgeable about cats and CP and knows just how to pitch the content at the right level for each age group. Val Chew, our Neutering Volunteer, is a retired primary school teacher and she is in her element with smaller children such as primary school classes, Rainbow Guides and Beaver Scouts. My contribution is to plan the talks and make sure we have back up materials and promotional items to hand.

We don't charge a fee to give the talks, but will happily accept a donation towards branch funds if one is offered. For younger groups, we often ask the children to bring a donation of cat food, which helps with awareness and makes them feel included in the work that we do.

Part of the community

If variety is the spice of life, then being a Cats Protection volunteer is like diving into a vat of curry powder! Over the last couple of years, our 'talks team' has visited a Mothers' Union that turned out – in the nicest way possible – to be more of a Grandmothers' Union, several lots of Brownies, a social group of lovely middle-aged ladies who started meeting 30 years ago as a 'Young Mums' group and a reception class at a primary school. Our oldest audience member was in her eighties, the youngest was four. Future talks are booked at a local Air Cadets Squadron and another Rainbow Guides group.

We tailor each talk to the audience. Children want to talk about their own cats and it's important to respond in the right way. "My cat has had 30 kittens!" is an interesting item of information and we've found that it's useful to have leaflets on hand about our free neutering scheme at every talk that we give. With younger groups, we try to focus on the basics, emphasising that cats need love, food, access to water, shelter, safety and veterinary care. We've found that, with little children, it's best to leave the topic of litter trays until the end of the talk as they can get quite excitable at the prospect of telling us about where their pets choose to toilet! With older groups, such as Brownies, we start to introduce the idea of volunteering and the role of Cats Protection in the

community. We talk about the importance of neutering and about the responsibilities of pet ownership. 'Goody Bags' are very useful for this age group; they like to have something tangible to take away. CP-branded bags, badges, pencils and bookmarks will be taken away by them to be used later, reminding them about the work we do and introducing CP material and contact details into the family home,

For adult groups, we tend to assume a basic knowledge of cats and, although most talks do settle down into lovely chats about members' own pets, past and present, we start off by talking about the charity, its aims and history and what we do locally. If we have stories about cats rescued from, or rehomed to, that particular area, we try to include them. Again, we give out promotional material and gifts such as pens and we also take our own newsletters, membership forms and the cute pyramidal cardboard collecting boxes.

For most of these groups, 'education' isn't the issue, but we do try to raise awareness of the charity and hope that we will recruit new members, or even new volunteers.

Securing the supporters of the future

We actively look for opportunities to give our talks; although we're only addressing a small group of people, it's a very personal and individual contact with each one and can have more of an impact than a radio broadcast or a newspaper article. Our talks are mentioned in our newsletter, partly to let our members know that we're spreading the word, but also in the hope that they'll mention us to any groups that they are a part of. Members who are the parents of younger children might be involved with Scout or Guide groups, while religious members can link us up with social groups connected to their faiths.

Our most recent talk was to a reception class at a primary school. I've delivered post-graduate courses to science students and made sales pitches to senior supermarket managers, but the thought of talking to 20 young children made me hesitate and I was very grateful to have Val along. I was counting on her experience of primary school teaching to make the whole thing go well. On the way there, she asked what age group we'd be working with and I told her that the children were four or five years old. She paled and told me that she was used to older groups. She seemed more nervous than me at that point!

We needn't have worried; the teacher and her classroom assistant had the class very well organised and the children behaved beautifully. We were asked to keep the talk to 20 minutes, as the little ones don't have a long attention span, but they kept asking questions about cats and telling us

about their own pets and, before we knew it, the bell had gone and we'd been there for twice the planned length of time! We'd printed off cue cards to guide the talk, focusing on the basic needs of cats and kittens, which led to interesting discussions on what to feed cats, when they should be allowed outside, where they sleep, when they need to see a vet and where they get their water from.

The biggest response came from talking about how cats need to be loved and to interact with people through play. The children really did seem to respond well to both of those ideas. We left face masks and pictures for the children to colour in and I have to admit that I thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

The rough with the smooth

Sometimes, particularly with older groups, not everyone there is sympathetic and it's important to be prepared for the difficult questions, which we do get. The most common one is "How do I keep my neighbours' cats out of my garden?" but we've also been in situations where we've had to explain why we can't instantly take in stray cats when they're reported to us and even why we choose to volunteer for an animal charity when there are so many other problems in the world. Questions like that are welcome, as they give an opportunity for

us to explain our situation and also to involve the group in discussion.

One of the unexpected bonuses of giving talks locally is that we sometimes meet branch members who we know of only by name. They may be elderly or disabled and unable to come to our fundraising events, but they subscribe to the newsletter and are keenly interested in our work. With church groups in particular, these supporters get the chance to come to the talk because they have support within the group from friends who can offer transport to the talks.

Getting out and about, giving talks to people of all generations, takes CP into the community, we find out how we are seen by others and get the opportunity to let others know about our rescue, rehoming and neutering work.

We've met people who adopted cats from us in the past and people who have given cats up to us. We've been told about fundraising opportunities and been told about feral colonies before they got out of control. We would love to do more talks, so if you know anyone in the area covered by our branch – PR1 – PR7, PR25 and PR26 postcode areas – who is looking for a speaker, please get in touch. Our phone number is 0845 177 0708, our email address is prestoncatsprotection@gmail.com. ●

