

Talking shop

Fran Holder takes us behind the scenes at the Cats Protection charity shop she runs in Worcester and reveals how its success led to a new joint-branch shop opening in the pretty market town of Pershore

The Worcester & District Cats Protection shop began with branch stalwart Margaret Kimberley, a former volunteer of 30 years. For some time, Margaret had been looking for the right premises to come along and happened to see an empty shop while in traffic in Worcester. After enquiring about its availability and securing a lease, the shop opened in February 2006. However, the landlord's wife had a phobia of cats and stated that we weren't to have any on the premises! Margaret managed the shop voluntarily for a year and then I was lucky enough to be interviewed for the position of Shop Manager. I'm passionate about cats, so this was my ideal job. I've always worked in retail and have been here for just over five years – in that time the shop really has gone from strength to strength.

The location

Our shop is in Worcester, 30 minutes south of Birmingham. There are a wide variety of customers who pop in, ranging from young mums and students to retired people. The area has a real community feel to it with people shopping locally for things they need and supporting other businesses nearby including a butcher, florist, hairdressers and other charity shops. Not everyone has extra cash to spare, so there is a real need for our shop so people can afford to treat themselves to some nearly-new clothes or something different for their house at affordable prices. We try to cater for everyone's interests which makes the shop appealing to everyone; we're lucky that we have regular supporters and customers – some of them come in every day – and I enjoy hearing what's new and having a chat. It's important to me that we provide good customer service, both through advice about cats and also finding what they may be looking for. The Worcester & District Branch shop has proved to be quite a focal point over the past five years. We display pictures in the window of the cats available for adoption and we are able to pass on contact details to the members of the public who may be interested in homing a cat. The shop has a lively and friendly atmosphere



with so many different people passing through every day, volunteers and customers alike. People often stop and look at our window display and at the posters and some come in and tell us stories about their own cats. Not a day goes by where we're not spreading the word about Cats Protection locally and nationwide. Quite often the Fosterers to our cats in care will pop in and catch up with what is going on, also picking up bargains too!

Donations – the lifeblood of the shop

It's a bit of a cliché, but every day is like Christmas in the shop. We never know what may be coming in the boxes and bags that are donated by kind members of the public and we get a wide variety of items, ranging from designer handbags and clothes to a toilet seat! Nothing is wasted as items that we are unable to sell are passed on to recycling companies which give us cash for items such as unsaleable clothing and books. However, our shop is the best way of recycling unwanted items and making money for the cats in need at the same time. It gives me a real sense of achievement knowing that, when items sell, we are helping the cats that need us.

A typical day

Again, another cliché, but no two days are ever the same – it really is so varied. But that's something else we all enjoy, as our volunteers never get bored when there is always something to do. We all have a part to play in keeping the shop operational and, like other aspects of Cats Protection, we would not survive without them. From serving the customers and keeping the shop tidy to sorting through the bags of donations, their help is enormous. I've learned that the presentation and layout of the shop is also vital – although we are a part of a charity we are still competing with other shops so we have to make sure customers enjoy coming in and return. Usually I'm in the shop and the volunteers do a morning or an afternoon shift to work around their own lives.

This is a typical day. It starts when the volunteers and I arrive to prepare for opening. The door opens at 10am and usually there are a few early customers waiting to come in. By 10.15am we receive our first donation, which could consist of a couple of black bags of clothes or household items. Marilyn, one of our morning volunteers, works on the bags and sorts through the items looking for good-quality stock that will sell. At 10.30am we'll have our first phone call of the day – someone has lost a cat – so we pass on the details of the person they need to speak to and offer to put a poster in the shop window. People are always grateful for our ability to act upon their concerns straight away. Then at 11am, if there's chance, I'll take a few minutes' break – it's time to put the kettle on! By 11.15am the donations received earlier have been sorted and all the clothes are steam cleaned, priced and go out on display. Usually by midday, we'll have a flurry of customers in-store all looking for a bargain they may only find with us. At 1pm, the volunteers change over. At this time I have a quick chat to update the afternoon shift with what has been happening, which could range from the reports of a missing cat or even someone wanting to adopt a cat they've spotted on the posters in the window. If things go a little quieter in the shop by 1.30pm, it's time to get some lunch as I've worked up an appetite by then!



Photos: Worcester News

By 1.55pm a car load of donations usually arrives with an assortment of bric-a-brac and toys. This keeps us busy for the afternoon, preparing more stock for the shop floor. By 2.20pm a customer who has enquired about homing a cat pops in, so we give her a leaflet with our contact details and a brief run down of what happens next. Then by 2.45pm someone comes in to collect a cat trap, as her cat has been attacked by the neighbourhood feral bully – we have to react to a variety of cat-related queries so it's not just about selling stock. It's 3.30pm and not long until home time. We do a quick tidy of the shop and cash up the till. Then by 4pm we close the door and go home, ready for another busy day!

The future

As the Worcester shop has been such a success, it was decided to go into partnership with the Evesham & District Branch – where I help out on my day off – with a joint shop in Pershore, which is halfway between Worcester and Evesham. After months of planning and paperwork, the store opened its doors on 26 February 2011. Everyone at both branches has been so excited about this joint venture, which I think is a nationwide first for the charity and we hope it will strengthen our existing working relationship with the Evesham & District Branch. The response we've had in these first few months has been really encouraging and I think it's something more branches should consider doing. Having the two branches working closely together has enabled us to promote the work of Cats Protection over a larger area and helped facilitate the homing of cats from both Worcester Branch Fosterers and the Evesham Adoption Centre. On a practical note, it's been useful to rotate the stock between the two shops too, as certain items sell better in Pershore and vice-versa in Worcester.

A job for life

I am passionate about the care and welfare of cats and feel fortunate that the job I do makes a difference. I am one of the lucky ones who has a job that I enjoy doing. The two shops I am involved with have been a great source of income for Cats Protection and help to raise the profile of the charity in the local area. I would encourage any branches to consider opening a charity shop – if you are passing through St John's or Pershore, please pop in and see us – you are guaranteed a bargain and a smile! ●