



Home comforts

Tom Briggs finds out how cats have become a welcome sight in care homes around the country

The elderly are, perhaps, the people to whom the affection of pets matters most and, all too often, cats are handed over to charities like Cats Protection when their owners move into residential care homes. To hear of a friendship ending in this way is heartbreaking; we all know what fantastic companions cats are and how much joy they can bring into people's lives, so having to say goodbye can be devastating. It is heartening, therefore, to know that cats are becoming a more common sight in care homes around the UK.

As all cat owners know, there are numerous health benefits to having a feline friend. As well as their mood-lifting qualities, it has been proved that contact with them can help lower blood pressure and reduce stress. It has also been suggested by some studies that time spent with them can help to prevent illness and allergies. Further evidence, as if it were needed, that pets have a massively important role to play in the lives of the elderly.

The Cinnamon Trust

The Cinnamon Trust is a national charity which helps people and their pets stay together when they become less mobile or have to move into care. Founded in 1984 by Averil Jarvis, MBE, the Trust has some 10,000 volunteers who carry out all manner of tasks to overcome any difficulties owners may have. This includes everything from buying food and walking dogs to taking full-time care of animals if their human companions are admitted to hospital. A worthy cause, we're sure you'll agree. Every year, it publishes a guide of the best pet-friendly residential care homes and holds an awards ceremony for those at the very top of the rankings. Elizabeth Court Rest Home in Bexhill on Sea, East Sussex was one of the finalists. ▶



Evelyn and Tibbs at Elisabeth Court Rest Home

Photo: Tom Briggs

Case study: Oscar

Oscar won the Best Friends category of Cats Protection's Rescue Cat Awards in 2010 after making a huge difference to the lives of the elderly residents at Mount Care Home in Wargrave, Reading. Initially a stray, he was adopted to improve the atmosphere for residents. He settled in immediately, preferring to spend time indoors with the residents and has made a huge impact on their quality of life.



Photo: INS

Elizabeth Court Rest Home

Wanting to see for myself how cats make a difference to people living in full-time care, I decided to visit Elizabeth Court. It's worth noting that I went along on Monday 16 January. I wouldn't normally go into such minute and apparently trivial detail, but this particular date had been dubbed by the media as 'Blue Monday' due to it being statistically the most depressing day in the calendar. It may as well have been mid summer's day! As well as seeing residents' faces light up at the mere mention of their pets, the general atmosphere in the home was overwhelmingly upbeat.

Speaking to Manager, Carol Robinson, and Head of Care, Mandy Dade, confirmed the happy feeling within the home and that the cats play an important part. "The first pet we had was a cat," says Carol. "In 2004, one of our residents came in and asked if he could bring his cat, April. Because Mandy and I are both animal lovers it seemed quite natural to say yes. That started the ball rolling. She'd been in a cattery while he was in hospital and he desperately wanted her back with him, so we couldn't say no!"

April's arrival sparked quite an influx of other animals into the home. As well as two resident dogs, there are three guinea pigs, five rabbits and three chickens – oh, and seven other cats too! April is joined in the feline contingent by Coco, Patch, Sunshine, Tibbs, Billy, Misty and Barney. Asked if they anticipated having so many pets living in the home, both Carol and Mandy laugh. "Over the years it's progressed a lot," says Mandy. "And I don't suppose we've stopped yet!" "We'll aim for one cat per resident!" adds Carol.

"The residents love the cats and the cats are very loyal to them," Carol explains. "Evelyn's cat, Tibbs, will follow her all around the home. She's even got her own special place in the lounge where she sits next to her. She never leaves her side."

Coco, meanwhile, arrived at Elizabeth Court as an indirect result of Cats Protection's Black Cat Awareness Day. "We saw a newspaper feature about black cats needing homes, so

asked the residents whether they liked the idea of getting another cat," says Carol. "Some of them were very interested, so we rang a couple of rescue centres. One of them told us about an 18-year-old black cat who they thought would struggle to find a home, so I said we'll have her!" Philip and Coco are now the best of friends. "Philip absolutely adores Coco, he idolises her. It gives him something to talk about and something to think about. He fusses over her and she means the world to him.

"At the same time, another gentleman, Brian, adopted a younger cat called Patch; he is in a wheelchair, so we needed to get him one who could get out of the way of his wheels quickly!"

So how do visitors react to there being so many different pets in the home, I wondered? "They love it," is Carol's emphatic answer. "Everyone comments, jokingly asking if we're running a cats' home or a vet, but we've never had anything negative."

Strong bond

Of course, nobody can tell you about the strength of the bond between the residents and their cats better than the residents themselves. Speaking to some of them really emphasised the importance of having feline friends around. For the most part, my questions quickly became conversations about the characters of their cats; naturally, this was proof enough, although the glints in eyes, body language and smiles also spoke volumes. However, speaking to one particular resident, Doris, put into words the strength of feeling that thousands like her have for their pets. Asked how she would cope without her cats around, her succinct but powerful reply is "Life wouldn't be any good to me." ●

Case study: Mungo & Midge

Mungo and Midge were adopted by Wraysbury House, Worthing from Cats Protection's Worthing & District Branch last year and have become established and well loved in the home. Shan Scott, who volunteers for the branch said: "Cats like Mungo and Midge can contribute enormously to the life of an elderly person either living alone or in a residential home. It is widely recognised pets have a high therapeutic value and can help combat feelings of isolation by offering companionship and unconditional love. Seeing two cats like these happy and secure in a new home is incredibly rewarding."



Photos: Helen Timmer

Mungo...



... and Midge