



# Tackling the cat crisis

**A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO NEUTERING**

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# Introduction

The cat population in the UK has reached crisis point. The numbers of cats entering the RSPCA increased by eight percent in the period 2010–2012, from 29,269 to 31,556. The charity is full to capacity and is having to rely heavily on private boarding establishments to house the many unwanted and abandoned cats – at considerable cost. At the end of 2013, 30 percent of the cats in the care of the RSPCA were accommodated in private boarding establishments – and the cost for boarding rose from £1.9 million in 2010 to £2.45 million in 2013. That figure is expected to rise again by the end of 2104.

Conversely, in the same period, the number of new homes that took in cats declined by 10 percent, but not as a result of reduced rehoming activity.

As 75 percent of the UK's cats are acquired as kittens, the market for adult rescue cats is already, by comparison, very small. As these data suggest, it may be reaching saturation point.

Urgent action is required to proactively address the cause of the cat population crisis.

It is widely recognised that effective neutering is the principal answer to cat population control but, despite the best efforts of the UK's rescue organisations in providing subsidised neutering schemes, the cat population has continued to spiral out of control.

As at 2012, neutering rates of owned cats stood at 86 percent. However, research has identified that in order to maintain a stable domestic cat population, neutering rates of 92 percent need to be achieved – that equates to a shortfall of 300,000 cats, or 30,000 per annum.

Achieving these increased neutering rates would not be possible without a better understanding of the behaviour and attitudes of those cat owners who do and those who do not neuter.

In 2012, the RSPCA commissioned new research into cat owners' motivations and barriers to neutering. This report details the research findings and sets out a number of multi-agency interventions for increasing neutering rates of owned cats.

Results of published work also support some of these findings and are referenced at the end of the document.

# Cat owners and neutering

It is estimated that there are between 9.5 and 11.6 million owned cats in the UK. Unlike dogs, just one in six are pedigree, the remainder being cross-breeds. The majority of cats – 75 percent – are acquired as kittens. Cat ownership is spread fairly evenly across all socio-demographic groups but varies with ethnicity – those from black and minority ethnic groups are statistically less likely to own a cat.

## To neuter or not to neuter?

Whereas cat ownership is fairly consistent across all socio-economic groups, there is considerable variation between those who neuter and those who do not.

There are twice as many people who do not neuter their cats in socio-economic groups C2DE compared to the socio-economic groups ABC1. Acquiring a cat spontaneously (i.e. those who acquire a kitten from a friend or family member whose cat has had a litter of kittens) correlates strongly with not neutering (50 percent less likely to neuter). Those who do not neuter are also likely to have friends and family who do not neuter.

The majority of people are pre-disposed to the idea of neutering. However, there is a widely held mistaken belief that a cat should have a litter of kittens before she is spayed, so this attitude does not come into play until after a first litter. Having a litter of kittens has become a deeply ingrained social norm.

The 'one litter' myth is further reinforced by owners applying human emotions to their cats, e.g. "she'll make a great mum/I don't think it's fair to deny her the right to motherhood".

Having a litter serves as a trigger for many to neuter – with the reality of having to look after, pay for the care of and part with the kittens, not living up to what cat owners had imagined. Despite this, 21 percent of cats that had a first litter will have a second litter and seven percent have a third litter or more. The more litters a cat has, the greater the chances of her – and the kittens – ending up in rescue.

The reason that the 'one litter' trigger is not always enough to prompt action is due to the considerable confusion that exists, among cat owners, about when to neuter. Finding a window to neuter becomes increasingly difficult after a cat has had a litter of kittens because of the need to wait until the kittens have been weaned by which time the cat may be pregnant again. The probability of an unneutered female cat getting pregnant is about 80 percent or higher.

In total, 15 percent of all female cats have had at least one litter of kittens, and 85 percent will be unplanned.

## The cost of neutering

Non-neuters tend to be more cost conscious and tend to overestimate the cost of neutering. They also believe that the comparatively cheap cost of getting and caring for a cat makes neutering expensive.

However, the cost of neutering is only a genuine barrier to those in lower-income socio-economic groups where other costs, such as household food and paying bills, are hard to meet.

The value of the neutering industry is estimated to be in the region of £45 million per annum, which is supported by charities, through subsidised neutering schemes, to a value in excess of £9 million per annum. In the period 2010–2012, Cats Protection, the PDSA and the RSPCA alone neutered more than a quarter of a million cats per annum between them.

Many veterinary practices provide reduced-cost neutering to support subsidised schemes. Despite considerable investment by both the veterinary profession and charities, it is not stopping the increasing cat population.

One of the key findings of the research was that the level of male cat castration is irrelevant for population control, although there are very good reasons for maintaining a healthy rate of male cat neutering. However, because there are more benefits to the owner that support the neutering of male cats (e.g. minimising anti-social behaviour, the spread of disease, straying and injuries) it is believed that male cat neutering rates can be achieved through education, allowing subsidised neutering to be targeted primarily at neutering females.



## Summary of RSPCA research findings

### CATS

- The cat population is estimated to be between 9.5 and 11.6 million.
- 75 percent of cats are acquired as kittens.
- The level of male cat castration is irrelevant for population control (although there are many very good reasons for maintaining a healthy rate of male cat neutering; e.g. minimising anti-social behaviour, the spread of disease, straying and injuries).
- The age of the cat is an important factor – cats less than six months old account for 14 percent of litters and those in the 7–12 month bracket account for 27 percent.
- At present approximately 86 percent of the cat population is neutered but, in order to achieve a stable domestic cat population, a rate of 92 percent needs to be achieved, and then sustained.
- 85 percent of litters are unplanned.

### OWNERS

- 24 percent of the adult population own cats.
- 16–34 year olds (especially 16–24 year olds) from socio-economic groups C2DE are 50 percent less likely to neuter their cats.

- Male cat owners are less likely to neuter than females, but females are more likely to have primary responsibility for pets in a multi-person household.
- Allowing one litter is a deeply ingrained social norm (32 percent of owners believe this).
- Female cat owners apply anthropomorphic tendencies to their female cats (e.g. "I don't want to take away her right to have babies")
- Having one litter serves as a key trigger to neuter – the reality is not as good as the idea (15 percent of all female cats have had at least one litter, of which 21 percent had a second litter, seven percent had a third litter or more).
- People do not realise that by not neutering they are contributing to the overpopulation problem – this is not a motivation for behaviour change.
- There is a lot of confusion around neutering – the cost, when to neuter, sibling matings, etc.
- While awareness of the existence of subsidised neutering/neutering vouchers is high, understanding of how to obtain them is very low.
- People see their actions of not neutering as the act of a loving, caring cat owner (i.e. cats should be allowed to have one litter) – therefore the well-being of the cat is the primary motivator for existing and future behaviour.



# Neutering as the solution

## Why neuter?

Neutering offers many benefits. For male cats, this includes reducing the spread of Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV), which is transmitted through cat bites, often when fighting over a female mate. It also reduces the risk of injury through fighting and of road traffic accidents from straying, as a neutered tomcat is less likely to wander far from home. An unneutered tomcat may be more likely to spray in the home, which can leave an unpleasant odour and ruin carpets and furnishings. Castration can decrease this spraying behaviour, making a neutered tomcat much more pleasant to live with.

The main benefit for neutering female cats is that it protects them from getting pregnant and, consequently, the owner from having to deal with the aftermath of unplanned litters of kittens.

## When to neuter?

The Cat Group ([www.thecatgroup.org.uk](http://www.thecatgroup.org.uk)), comprising animal welfare and veterinary organisations, recommends that:

- owned cats are neutered at four months
- rescue kittens are neutered prior to rehoming as early as eight weeks.

This policy is supported by both the British Veterinary Association and the British Small Animal Veterinary Association.

## Owned cats

Historically, the timing of neutering has been six months for owned cats. However, many cats reach sexual maturity at four months. Therefore, neutering before the first season is vital to reduce the number of unplanned litters.

While there are a growing number of vets who support neutering at four months (pre-pubertal) and who have signed to Cats Protection's Early Neutering Register ([www.cats.org.uk/early-neutering](http://www.cats.org.uk/early-neutering)), the number who actively promote and practise four-month neutering is still low.

For example, a recent survey of vets who participate in the London Cat Care & Control Consortium (C4) to provide free neutering to cat owners on low incomes in the greater London area, revealed that the average age for neutering was six months.

**The promotion and practice of pre-pubertal neutering (at four months) by vets – as the norm for owned cats – is vital to tackling the cat population crisis.**

## The case for four-month neutering

The practice of neutering at four months is taught at a number of the UK's vet schools – Bristol, Nottingham, Glasgow and Surrey. However, veterinary graduates tend to adopt the policies of the practice they join – more commonly neutering at six months – rather than take into practice what has been taught at vet school.

There is an extensive body of literature where the effects of neutering at four months have been evaluated. These studies suggest:

- There are no increased surgical or anaesthetic risks.
- The surgical procedure is shorter and recovery times are quicker.
- There are no significant adverse developmental effects – this includes the fear that earlier neutering results in a smaller urethra and increased risk of FLUTD (feline lower urinary tract disease), which have been shown to be clearly untrue in many studies.
- Earlier neutering may have beneficial effects including a reduction in the risk of abscesses, reduced sexual behaviour, reduced urine spraying and reduced aggression.
- Females spayed prior to six months have a greater than 90 percent reduction in the risk of developing mammary carcinoma compared to unneutered females.
- Some other health benefits have been suggested by certain studies, including a lower risk of asthma, FLUTD and gingivitis, although more work is needed to confirm these observations.
- Earlier neutering may result in a delay in growth plate closure of long bones, but this does not affect adult size and has not been associated with adverse consequences.
- Neutering is a risk factor for obesity in cats but studies have failed to show a difference between earlier neutered cats and those neutered later.

## Cats in rescue

More than 90 percent of cats rehomed by rescue organisations are neutered by the rescue organisations themselves. In terms of intake, it is equally split between strays and unwanted owned cats being handed in to rescue organisations.

About one-third of all cats rehomed are kittens, and about one-third of this figure will have been born in rescue. A recent survey of the major rescue organisations found that it is commonplace to rehome a kitten and provide a voucher for neutering at a later stage.

Charities can put processes in place to increase compliance, but it is inevitable that some of the unneutered kittens will have an unplanned litter.

With space at a premium, it would not be practicable for charities to hold on to kittens until they are four months old, neither would it be good animal welfare for the kittens. Being timely in finding kittens new homes is of paramount importance.

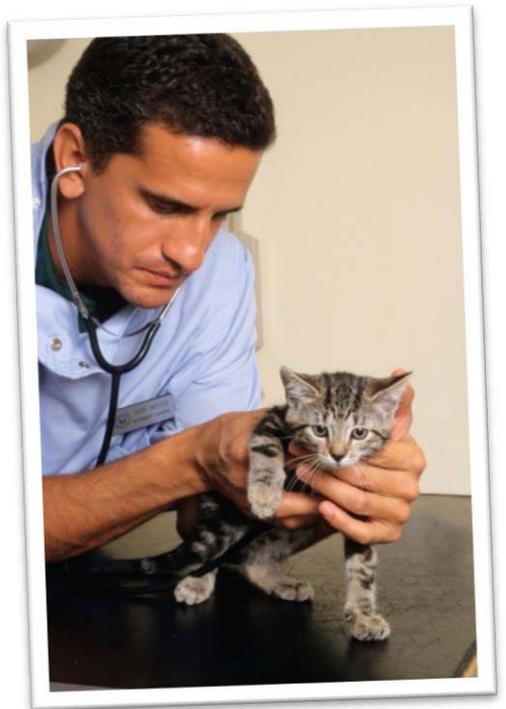
For this reason, the major rescue organisations support the policy that no kitten or cat should leave a rescue organisation unneutered. Many thousands of kittens have been neutered at eight weeks and there is evidence to show that, done properly, it brings no added risks to the cats and in fact they recover more quickly.

**Kittens in rescue should be neutered – preferably at eight weeks – prior to being rehomed. Rescue organisations need to take a unified approach on this in order to tackle the cat population crisis.**

*"Initially it is unnerving to look at such a small kitten on the operating table...now it is completely normal to operate on a 500 gram/eight-week-old kitten. The Quad injection works within two minutes so scheduling your op list is very flexible. With a little attention to temperature control we have much smoother recoveries than in older cats, and we haven't had any post-op complications in a year of doing these. Flank or midline spays are equally quick and simple.*

*"The castrations are a little more fiddly, but not beyond anyone. Once you overcome the mental barrier associated with the smaller animal, the benefits to the individual and population become clear."*

Steve Gosling, Veterinary Surgeon, Wood Green, The Animals Charity



# Interventions through collaboration

## Better education

Whilst younger people from the socio-economic groups C2DE are twice as likely to not neuter, there is still significant opportunity to increase neutering rates across all age groups and demographics.

The key barriers identified, which can be addressed through education, are:

- the belief that cats should be allowed to have a litter of kittens
- confusion about when to neuter.

## Getting the message right

Rescue organisations have been putting considerable effort, for many years, into educating cat owners to neuter. These campaigns have often focused on the overpopulation message and the irresponsible behaviour associated with not neutering. However, the research found that such messaging is not a motivator for behaviour change because the reason that people do not neuter was underpinned with the incorrect belief that they were doing what was best for their cat – i.e. letting their cat have a litter of kittens.

The research concluded that neutering needs to be repositioned as the act of a caring, loving cat owner and that the 'one litter' myth needs to be tackled head on.

## Veterinary professionals as educators

Veterinary practices have an important role to play as educators as they are often the first point of contact for new kitten owners and a trusted source of information. Some veterinary practices provide kitten health packages, which include booking dates for vaccinations and neutering, while others rely on owners remembering to return their cat for neutering, which may be too late. Poor owner knowledge of feline reproduction is a major contributory factor in the rate of unplanned litters.

A greater consistent emphasis by veterinary practices on educating cat owners about timely neutering and pre-booking appointments at the time of vaccinations could help considerably to reduce the rate of unplanned litters.

There are of course some cat owners who do not have contact with a veterinary practice and where a different intervention is required. This is covered in more detail in the next section.

## Community outreach

There is a correlation between non-neutering and not being registered with a vet – 15 percent of owned cats are not currently registered with a veterinary practice. This limits the opportunity for education about neutering and other issues of responsible cat ownership.

Many rescue organisations successfully run community outreach projects to engage with the harder to reach audiences. These work particularly well when there is a benefit to the owner, as well as the animal, e.g. a free health check or flea and worm treatment. Neutering is generally a secondary offer at community outreach events, and normally provided via a neutering voucher being issued to the cat owner. Redemption rates are often not particularly high as the owner has to make an appointment with a veterinary practice that may not be the one they regularly use, if they use one at all. In fact, many rescue organisations consider vouchers to be an ineffective intervention, unless some urgency on the part of the owner exists or the organisation follows up to ensure the voucher has been used.

The efficacy of neutering vouchers is in part dependent on the price that vets will charge to make up the difference between what the charity pays and what the owner pays. These charges vary enormously throughout the UK, with many vets carrying out neutering at cost (for the full value of the voucher) and others charging considerably more.

## Working with veterinary professionals in the community

It is recognised that the veterinary industry is committed to promoting responsible pet ownership and supporting rescue organisations to do the same.



It is also recognised that veterinary practices are businesses, and like any other business will have profit margins. This means that low-cost neuterings are not profitable compared to other services such as more complicated surgery (some veterinary practices specialise solely in providing high-volume, low-cost veterinary services).

Rescue organisations are keen to work in partnership with the veterinary profession to provide affordable neutering – particularly as non-neuters have been identified as primarily those who are more cost conscious.

An increasing number of charities are starting to work with veterinary practices, who provide either their time, their facilities or both, outside of core business hours to support low-cost neutering initiatives.

For example, veterinary practices are supporting spay days or weekends, by opening up their facilities in the evenings or at weekends. Other vets and vet nurses are providing pro bono support to assist at static or mobile neutering clinics. These partnerships minimise the impact on core business while allowing the veterinary profession to contribute towards furthering animal welfare in the UK. There are also opportunities for student vets to gain work experience under supervision and for vets requiring practical experience, provided they have the relevant qualifications, to keep abreast of CPD (Continuing Professional Development) requirements, for example, if they have been on maternity leave or have returned from working overseas.

### Working with housing providers

Unneutered cats can be a nuisance. Unneutered tomcats are more likely to spray, which can leave an unpleasant odour on carpets and furnishings. Houses with multiple cats are more likely to be damaged and if there are particularly high numbers of cats there could be associated environmental health issues. The issue of multi-cat households is covered in more detail in the next section. Unneutered female cats will breed, contributing to the local owned and stray cat population.

There is mutual benefit in housing associations, rescue organisations and the vet profession working together to run neutering initiatives and tackle the cat crisis at a local level.

### Working with social services and other agencies

Whilst tackling the cat population crisis is primarily driven by an animal welfare need, there are some aspects where animal welfare cannot be fully addressed without appropriate intervention for the owners.

This includes the issue of multi-cat households, or cat hoarding as it is also known. There is still little known about the causes of the animal hoarding and hoarding disorder has only recently been recognised as a mental health disorder in its own right.

Multi-cat households are a perpetual problem for rescue organisations, and a contributory factor to the cat population crisis the UK is experiencing. Approximately 1,000 cases of multi-cat households (10 cats or more) that require help and advice come to the attention of the RSPCA every year.

Such cases cannot be addressed solely from the perspective of animal welfare. For example, trying to convince the owner of multiple cats that the number of cats needs to be reduced, when he or she does not recognise that there is a problem in the first place, can be extremely problematic and time consuming. Recidivism is also very common in cases of animal hoarding.

This issue therefore needs a multi-agency response, which includes social services and environmental health. The RSPCA is leading in the development of this as a specific project, commissioning research into the mental health issues associated with animal hoarding in the first instance.



## Introducing pet policies into tenancy agreements

Many housing providers have expressed concern about placing restrictions on pet ownership for their tenants. The following legal position has been lifted from the RSPCA's publication *Community Animal Welfare Footprints*

(CAWF) *Housing: A Guide to Good Practice* and sets out how policies such as requirements for cats to be neutered, and a limit on the number of cats owned, can be achieved without infringing tenants' human rights.

### The RSPCA's legal position on tenancy agreements and pet policies in relation to human rights

The RSPCA believes that restrictions on pet ownership tenancy agreements and pet policies are appropriate and will not infringe tenants' human rights, where they are needed to ensure good animal welfare, avoid nuisance to other tenants and/or protect the landlord's premises from damage. These aims have been recognised in case law as legitimate to justify restrictions on people that affect their rights, for example, to private life and peaceful enjoyment of their possessions such as pets. The RSPCA would expect that a landlord has the discretion to decide what limitations are necessary in the circumstances it is dealing with and to balance the competing rights of freedoms of all tenants.

The RSPCA anticipates that restrictions meeting the following criteria will be lawful.

- They are aimed at ensuring animal welfare and/or reducing anti-social behaviour or other nuisance and/or protecting the landlord's premises.
- They are proportionate to their aim, i.e. are not more restrictive than necessary (landlords should consider whether there are other ways of achieving the aim and if so, which is the most appropriate).
- They are non-discriminatory.
- They comply with the Unfair Terms in Consumer Contract Regulations 1999 (UTCCR).

On the latter point, although the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) has stated that blanket exclusions of pets could be unfair, the OFT would be unlikely to object to a term (made known to the tenant before they enter into the tenancy agreement) prohibiting the keeping of pets that could harm the property, affect subsequent tenants or be a nuisance to other residents.

As such, in the RSPCA's view, a well-thought-through pet policy which imposes limitations on pet keeping that are necessary to protect other tenants from problems caused by irresponsible pet ownership, or to prevent damage (that is more than wear and tear) to the landlord's property, should not breach UTCCR or human rights law. The placing of responsibility on landlords for policies and procedures to deal with anti-social behaviour (in the Housing Act 1996) seems to support our view.

It would seem sensible for landlords to document the thought process behind their pet policy and relevant tenancy terms, and to keep examples of situations that have led to the policy, or changes to it, or which the policy has enabled them to deal with effectively.

***Please note, this text is simply the RSPCA's view. However, the RSPCA does not itself operate as a housing provider and does not have any expertise in housing law; this statement of our view should not be relied upon as legal advice by any person.***

The RSPCA is happy to provide help and advice to housing providers during drafting or amending of a pets policy. For further information or to receive a copy of the CAWF housing guide please email: [politicalaffairs@rspca.org.uk](mailto:politicalaffairs@rspca.org.uk)

# Conclusions

To maintain a stable domestic cat population, neutering rates of 92 percent for female spays need to be achieved and sustained. Despite considerable investment in neutering activities to date, that figure is still falling short and, more importantly, there have been insufficient inroads made with those audiences least likely to neuter. As a result, unacceptably high numbers of cats end up in rescue organisations, which can be detrimental to cats' welfare and come at considerable cost to cat rescue organisations.

With fresh insight into cat owners' motivations and barriers to neutering, rescue organisations, the veterinary profession and other bodies need now to target more resources and activities toward tackling the problem at source, rather than just reacting to the symptoms.



## The key ingredients for achieving success are:

- All veterinary practices promote and practise pre-pubertal neutering.
- All rescue organisations adopt policies to neuter prior to rehoming.
- A re-focus for neutering education campaigns that re-position neutering as the act of a caring, loving cat owner.
- The one litter myth is dispelled.
- Collaboration between animal welfare and rescue organisations, the veterinary profession and housing associations through community outreach programmes to target those audiences less likely to neuter.
- Pro-bono support provided by veterinary professionals to further animal welfare.

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**IN 2013, SEVEN ANIMAL WELFARE ORGANISATIONS  
CAME TOGETHER TO FORM THE CAT POPULATION  
CONTROL GROUP WITH THE AIM OF MAXIMISING  
THE EFFECTIVENESS OF NEUTERING IN THE UK.**

Please contact Justine Pannett ([justine.pannett@rspca.org.uk](mailto:justine.pannett@rspca.org.uk))  
for further information and to discuss how you can play a part  
in tackling the cat crisis.

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