



HBCA

HUMAN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE FOR ANIMALS

CASE STUDY

CAT WATCH: Understanding Unowned Cat Populations

ORGANISATION CATS PROTECTION LEAGUE

COUNTRY UK (ENGLAND)

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Project Background

In 2015 Cats Protection (CP) identified a need, in line with their strategic aims, to conduct work to develop an understanding of the population of unowned cats in the UK. A pilot project was initiated in 2016, in Bulwell, Nottingham, to enable CP to learn more about the numbers and densities of community cats and potentially positively alter human behaviours towards cats. While the project originated as a means to test a methodology to count unowned cat numbers, it developed into a more wide-ranging project in terms of activities and intended outcomes, which as well as establishing cat numbers in the community, also sought to influence resident awareness and understanding and behaviour. Listed below are the outcomes the project set out to achieve.

SOME COMMENTS FROM THE COMMUNITY ABOUT STRAY CATS:

'Taking care of stray cats'

'It is good to protect the stray cats in Bulwell'

'Watch out for cats that need help and keeps the population down'

'Community to keep an eye on the cats and shows others are out there.'

'Some people don't know what to do about stray cats or how to get them help or find information to help the stray cats.'

'Because it is making us aware to look out for and help stray cats. Didn't know there was so many strays.'

'Cats need to be looked after'

'Looking after the stray cats is good and a lot of people don't...'

'Can help cats off the streets and lower the number of stray cats'

'Control numbers stopping pest can be nuisance'

'It is social and brings neighbours together too.'

Primary outcomes

- Increase CP's knowledge around the potential overpopulation issue of unowned cats
- Develop a methodology for a census of unowned cats, which could eventually be UK wide
- Increase the level of knowledge and awareness amongst the wider community about community cats and cats generally
- Improve CP's ability to promote appropriate neutering and welfare messages to external audiences
- Create a network of new and engaged supporters

Secondary outcomes

- Increased rates of neutering
- Higher levels of understanding of, and responsibility for, cat welfare issues in the community
- Community cats seen as more of a community asset
- Higher rates of targeted trap-neuter-return (TNR) activity to help control the urban feral population
- More cats managed and maintained in the community as community cats, where they are already existing as such

Overview of Intervention

Project started with 776 door to door surveys. Questions were based on finding out about people's attitudes and knowledge and 'values modes' – happy to share these findings.

Results from the surveys were the basis for the messaging used throughout the project in leaflets, news feeds, Facebook adverts etc.

Hubs were set up in community rooms in the ward and we had a constant presence. We also held events so people could report stray cats to us. Facebook group set up and this has been very strong. Some members have commented that it is a community they never had before. It has resulted in positive peer pressure, sharing of good information, reporting of strays, lost and found and volunteer recruitment!

App was developed which used GPS if people took picture of stray cat and included some welfare messages

Targeted Facebook ads and calls to action

Finally, door to door engagement on the reported 'hotspot' streets

Welfare Concerns

529 stray cats were reported to us during the study period September – January. Although some of these will have been duplicates, we estimated through de-duping the figures that we could still be looking at as many as 400. This is a welfare concern in itself! Once we started the on street engagement and targeted TNR, we also found friendly strays that needed to come into care as well as the community cats that were neutered and returned. The work is ongoing, but so far we have neutered 80 of the reported strays. 60 of these TNR and 23 owned pets. A further 21 community cats have been taken into care as they were very friendly strays and not coping with their outdoor lifestyle. 7 have been PTS due to FIV positive.

Achievements

Positive indications that the project has started to affect behaviour change among engaged audiences (people who have come into contact with CP through face to face or Facebook engagement). It is also clear that the project has brought wider benefits to the community in terms of network building and tackling social isolation.

Specific achievements include the following:

- A high level of reach was achieved via project communications, more than a third of residents claimed to have heard of Bulwell Cat Watch
- Most unowned cats in the area were reported during the Cat Watch
- After the project there was a strong response in the evaluation surveys that people now felt more positive about the benefits of getting unowned cats neutered
- Above average levels of neutering were achieved for this project, compared to other neutering campaigns CP deliver
- Some indications that residents felt more positive about unowned cats because numbers are being controlled and cats are being looked after
- Engaged residents also reported having an improved awareness of the unowned cat population
- Unowned cat 'hot-spots' have been identified and targeted in terms of TNR activity and resident engagement work
- 113 cats have been rehomed in Nottingham over the course of a year partly as a result of the campaign
- The majority of people participating in the evaluation survey reported that the Bulwell Cat Watch was a good thing for cats and the community
- A new and lasting network was created through the Facebook group. There is further potential to develop this and other networks of engaged residents
- Particular community benefits were highlighted including creating more opportunities for socially isolated people to engage with others, positive feelings about the high levels of caring attitude within the community that became apparent during the project, encouraging a community spirit. People even reported making new acquaintances and meeting in person to talk about the cats they were caring for
- 58% of respondents from the Facebook group said that they had talked to others in Bulwell about the project suggesting that as well as being the target audience for taking part in the Cat Watch and changing behaviour, members of this group were also useful advocates for the project, sharing information within their own networks
- The Facebook group developed organically and membership of it peaked in line with when Facebook adverts were launched and when leaflets about it were being dropped - however the membership of the group did continue to grow organically even once the promotion of it had ceased

Challenges

Evaluating the HBC component was very hard and in this case we only did a process evaluation, not an impact one, but there is encouraging stuff from the small sample sizes we had. The positive is that generally the community understood what we are doing and we do now really feel like we have gained a lot of trust and have interacted well with feeders. Our knowledge about the cats has increased vastly and this wouldn't have been possible without the help of the community – so that is behaviour change in itself.

The project had multiple aims and the ability to fulfil all of them in a short period of time was ambitious. Agreeing when and how each of the aims will be achieved in advance will improve the results of future projects

Providing a hub for people to come to off their own initiative was not effective in engaging large numbers of people - luckily the project did not rely upon this as its only form of engagement and other methods were more effective over the course of the project

The Facebook Group was a huge success for the project but was under resourced in terms of project team time and management so could have been even more effective than it was with additional investment and focus

People found the app too complex to use and preferred easier ways to engage - this could not be changed during this project but the feedback will help to improve app use in future projects

Sustainability

Too soon to tell, but the work is ongoing and our plan is to continue to recruit volunteers to sustain the work going forwards. We have recruited four excellent volunteers since the start of the project.

Lessons to Pass On

Take more time! We were very keen to progress and had a remit with quite a short initial time scale. Although we did consult with stakeholders and residents from the beginning, I would have liked more time to do more of this and more time to create general awareness from the outset

The mixed communications channel approach worked well as people reported having found out about the project in various ways, via both face-face and written communications. In particular, the leaflet and events were the most successful communication channels within the community.

The 'hub' presence in the community was very resource heavy and although widely promoted was not as well attended as we would have hoped and this is thought because it involved a very high level of engagement to be proactive in visiting the hub and this would not be the case for the majority of residents.

The hosting of events resulted in a high level of reach with relatively low level of resource and enabled the engagement of people who would not otherwise be proactively engaged (new audiences) - the conclusion being that engaging people from where they are approach is better than the magnet approach of trying to draw people in, as with the hubs. The events were mentioned positively by a considerable number of resident survey participants.

People's perception of the project was that it was primarily about 'looking after unowned cats' with less acknowledgement or awareness of the other critical elements of the project such as the data gathering via taking photos and counting unowned cats, suggesting that these were messages which needed to be more effectively communicated in future similar projects.

The app had been designed as the primary way for residence to report information on unowned cats, however it turned out not to be the case as very few data sets were collected this way. Some of the resident feedback was that the app was too complex, with too many stages so this would need to be a consideration in similar projects.

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Facebook adverts were successful in raising awareness and promoting engagement and action - the adverts with more direct calls to action and language resulted in better engagement.

On the Facebook group people seemed to like engaging in discussions which were focussed on three main themes: 1) sharing images or sightings of unowned cats 2) reporting pet cats that were lost and found and 3) sharing information and advice about local cats.

Surveys on members of the Facebook group suggested that they would have benefited from more formal management and regular updates by a core member of the project team to maximise impacts and information spreading via this network - additional information they would have liked to have received included news, volunteering information and updates on the cats.

Any Other Information

We now plan to do another four 'Cat Watches' in different locations. We have a 12 month period for each and will be doing an impact evaluation this time



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Valuable information is not easily accessible to those planning and involved with projects aiming to apply HBC theories and principles . Hence, HBCA is developing a resource that provides an overview of interventions and the lessons we can learn from them. If you have a case study to submit or any enquiries about this case study, please get in touch.