

Code of Practice for Welfare of Cats



Department of
**Agriculture and
Rural Development**

www.dardni.gov.uk

AN ROINN
**Talmhaíochta agus
Forbartha Tuaithe**

MÁNYSTRIE O
**Fairms an
Kintra Fordèrin**

Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011

	<u>Page</u>
Introduction to the Code	2
The Code of Practice	3
Section 1: The need for a suitable environment	4
Section 2: The need for a suitable diet	6
Section 3: The need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns	8
Section 4: The need it has to be housed with, or apart from, other animals	10
Section 5: The need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease	12
Annex 1 – Sources of further information	14

Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011

Introduction to the Code

This introduction, which is not part of the Code of Practice, tells you about the Code and provides advice on owning a cat.

Owning and caring for a cat can be a source of great enjoyment, but you should be aware that cat ownership is a major responsibility. Typically, cats live for about 14 years, but some live much longer. Consequently, you should think carefully about all factors that will affect your ability to care for a cat and whether owning a cat is suitable for you. Would you be able to provide for all of a cat's needs? You will need to consider the size and location of your property, and the financial and time implications of having a cat as a pet. Caring for a cat can be expensive and you should consider whether, for instance, you would be able to afford the cost of routine and unexpected veterinary treatment, or the cost of pet health insurance.

There is no one "perfect" way to care for all cats because every cat, and every situation, is different. It is up to you to find out what your cat's precise needs are and how to meet them. Under Section 9 of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 ("the Act") you must take all reasonable steps to ensure that you meet the following needs that your cat has, which are set out in the Act as follows:

- (a) its need for a suitable environment;
- (b) its need for a suitable diet;
- (c) its need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns;
- (d) any need it has to be housed with, or apart from, other animals, and
- (e) its need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

Under the Act you are always responsible for your cat's needs. Furthermore, if you are a parent or guardian of a child under the age of 16 years, you are responsible for any animal that child is in charge of or owns. If you are unable to care for your cat at any time, you must make arrangements for another suitable person to look after it on your behalf. It is important to remember that you remain responsible for ensuring your cat's needs are met, even when you are away. The person with whom you leave your cat will also be legally responsible for your cat's welfare in your absence.

If you own or are responsible for a cat, and fail to meet its welfare needs or cause it unnecessary suffering, you may be prosecuted under the Act.

The Code of Practice

This Code of Practice (the Code) applies to all cats.

The purpose of the Code is to provide practical guidance to help you to comply with the provisions of Section 9 of the Act. It does not tell you precisely how to care for a cat, but it summarises the important things you should consider when making decisions about how best to care for your cat.

A breach of a provision of this Code is not an offence in itself but, if proceedings are brought against you for an offence under Section 9 of the Act, the Court will look at whether or not you have complied with the Code in establishing liability.

If you are unsure about anything to do with the care of your cat you should always seek advice from an expert. Throughout this Code the term “vet” will be used to refer to a veterinary surgeon. You will also find reference in the Code to “other suitably qualified cat care specialists”. These are people who, through qualification and experience, can provide expert advice on cat welfare. Examples include veterinary nurses, animal behaviourists, and staff at animal welfare organisations.

Other sources of information are listed in Annex 1. You can find out more about the Act and other legislation relating to cats at www.dardni.gov.uk. You can find more advice and information on how to look after your pet, including how to get a pet passport, at www.nidirect.gov.uk

Section 1: The need for a suitable environment

What your cat needs

All cats, including those that live predominantly outdoors, need a safe environment and protection from hazards. Some examples of hazards include household chemicals, poisonous plants and open windows or balconies in high buildings, which your cat might try to get out of. Cars also pose a major threat to the safety and welfare of cats.

All cats need a safe, comfortable place to rest undisturbed. Some cats, such as farm cats that live outdoors, need access to a safe shelter. Living in a cold or wet place, without shelter, can lead to unnecessary suffering. A cat must be able to avoid things that scare it, including other cats and they all need a place to hide where they feel safe. They often feel safest when high up. If unable to hide and avoid threats, your cat may suffer anxiety and chronic stress, which can lead to illness.

Cats are naturally curious. They are athletic animals and need opportunities to run, jump and climb. If a cat is bored, and does not have enough to do, it may suffer.

Cats are naturally clean animals and need regular, easy access to an appropriate place to go to the toilet. They do not like to use heavily soiled areas. Some cats need to use an indoor toilet area, for example a litter tray.

Cats are territorial and become very attached to places. They are naturally frightened of unfamiliar places and smells. For example, if you move your cat to a new home, it may be frightened by the presence of cats that have already established territories in the area.

You may at some point need to transport your cat by car or some other form of vehicle. Your cat has no control over this environment so try to ensure its comfort. Your cat should never be left alone in a vehicle in warm weather.

What you should do:

- Provide your cat with a safe, comfortable, dry, draught-free, clean and quiet place where it can rest undisturbed. You should change your cat's bedding regularly.
- Take all reasonable steps to protect your cat from hazards indoors and outdoors.
- Allow your cat, if it spends a lot of time outdoors, to be with its owner and be part of the family environment.

- Make sure your cat has constant access to safe hiding places, where it can escape if it feels afraid.
- Cats should not be tethered.
- If your cat does not go outside, make sure it has plenty of activities to do and enough space to exercise, climb and play indoors.
- Your cat should be provided with a suitable toilet area that is quiet and easily accessible.
- Before you move your cat, you should gradually get it used to a secure cat carrier. Putting familiar smelling items in the carrier and any place you move your cat to can help it feel at ease.
- If you have any concerns about moving to a new home, or transporting your cat, you should consult a vet or other suitably qualified cat care specialist.
- Make sure that any place you leave your cat is large enough to ensure, at all times, a comfortable area with effective ventilation and temperature control. Your cat must be able to move around to ensure its comfort and be able to avoid becoming too hot or too cold.
- Do not leave your cat unattended in an unsafe environment, or for any period of time that is likely to cause it distress.

Section 2: The need for a suitable diet

What your cat needs

Cats need fresh drinking water at all times. Without water to drink a cat will become dehydrated. Water should never be withheld except on the recommendation of a vet.

Cats need a well-balanced diet to stay fit and healthy, and they all need foodstuffs that can only be derived from meat-based products. Individual dietary needs depend on many factors including age, activity and state of health. Some cats have special dietary needs. For example, pregnant and nursing cats, young growing cats, old cats and cats that are ill.

Cats generally prefer to eat several small meals each day. How much food a cat needs depends on its age, the type of food, bodyweight and level of activity. If a cat eats more food than it needs, it will become overweight and may suffer. If you underfeed your cat, it will lose weight and may become ill. Healthy adult cats should maintain a stable body weight that is neither too thin nor too fat. Your vet can advise on the correct weight for your cat.

Many cats will not eat if their food is placed too close to their toilet site or something they are frightened of.

You can assess your cat's weight by gently checking if you can feel its ribs if they are hard to find it may be overweight. If the ribs and backbone are prominent, then your cat may be underweight and ill. If in doubt, ask your vet or pet care specialist whether your cat is within its correct weight range.

Too thin:

- Ribs can be seen on shorthaired cats.
- No fat can be felt (where present the skin pouch underneath the belly is empty i.e. skin on skin).
- Tummy looks empty due to lack of fat.
- Spine and hip bones can be seen - your cat looks like a size 0 model.
- Small amount of muscle over the back and hips, upper legs feel "stringy", skull bone very obvious when stroking the head. Cat feels "bony" when stroked.

Ideal:

- Well-proportioned - your cat looks sleek.
- Waist can be seen behind the ribs.
- Belly skin pouch allowed but is not totally filled out with fat.
- Ribs can be felt but not seen (with a slight fat covering).

Too heavy:

- Ribs not easily felt as covered by a lot of fat.
- Waist not obvious - you cannot tell if cat has a skin pouch.
- Round body shape especially tummy (bear in mind breed differences).
- Has difficulty jumping up on chairs/table and going up stairs.

What you should do:

- Provide your cat with clean fresh drinking water at all times.
- Make sure your cat eats a well balanced diet suitable for its individual needs.
- If you are uncertain of the diet your cat needs, take advice from your vet or other suitably qualified cat care specialist.
- Read, and be guided by, the feeding instructions relating to any cat foods you buy. Adjust how much you feed your cat to make sure it does not become underweight or overweight. Note that some cat foods may contain additives, colourants or soya which can cause allergies or other ailments.
- Be aware that any change in the amount your cat eats or drinks may be a sign of ill health so it would be advisable to consult a vet and to follow any advice given.
- Feed your cat every day, preferably splitting the daily ration into several small meals throughout the day, unless advised otherwise by your vet.
- Position your cat's food and water well away from the litter tray, or things that it finds frightening.
- Allow your cat to eat its meals without being disturbed.
- Any changes to your cat's diet should be made gradually.

Section 3: The need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns

What your cat needs

How a cat behaves depends on its age, personality and past experiences. Most cats are playful animals and enjoy socialising with people. Cats like to play with toys and those that do not go outside often play at hunting indoors. However, some cats, especially those that live outdoors, may be less sociable with people and other animals.

Cats sleep for many hours of the day, but when they are awake they need opportunities to exercise and play. Additionally, all cats need an appropriate scratching place, high enough to allow them to stretch out fully, to mark their territory and condition their claws.

Any change in behaviour may indicate that your cat is distressed and needs help. (You will find more information in section 5 of the Code)

Scratching or 'claw conditioning' is part of normal cat behaviour. Cats condition their claws for various reasons, and regular scratching removes the frayed and worn outer claws, exposing the new and sharper claws growing underneath. It also exercises and strengthens the muscles used when the claws move in and out of the paw, which is essential for a cat's normal behaviour of climbing and catching prey.

What you should do:

- You should ensure your cat receives enough mental, social and physical stimulation to satisfy its individual behavioural needs.
- Provide your cat with safe toys and regular opportunities to play with friendly people and by itself.
- Ensure that your cat can rest undisturbed when it wants to.
- Make sure your cat has opportunities to exercise each day to stay fit, happy and healthy. If your cat does not go outside, provide suitable indoor activities to keep it active.
- If you are unsure how much exercise your cat needs take advice from your vet or other suitably qualified cat care specialist.
- Make sure that your cat can reach all the things that it needs (e.g. bed, food, water, litter or outdoors) without having to get too close to things, people or other animals that may scare it.

- You should know how your cat behaves when fit, happy and healthy. If its behaviour changes or becomes a problem it could be distressed, bored, ill or injured and you should seek advice from a vet or other suitably qualified cat care specialist.
- Never shout at, or punish, your cat. It will not understand and will just become more nervous or scared.
- You should only use positive reward-based training, and avoid harsh, potentially painful, training methods.
- Ensure children allow cats to exhibit normal behaviours.

Section 4: The need it has to be housed with, or apart from, other animals

What your cat needs

Adult cats show variable degrees of sociability and although some cats may be friendly with other cats, usually those they have grown up with, others will prefer to be on their own. Cats that are friends generally groom and rub against each other and share the same bed.

However, many cats are happier living without other cats and can be reluctant to accept new cats. A cat may suffer if it cannot avoid other cats it does not like. Introducing cats in a patient, careful way can increase their chances of living together happily. However, keeping too many cats together can result in a stressful and unhealthy environment, which may make it difficult for you to meet the individual needs of your animals.

Cats that are treated kindly from an early age usually learn to see people as friends. Socialisation with people, and other animals it is likely to come into contact with, is an essential part of early learning for a kitten. In early life, the more kittens get used to people, noises, objects and other animals, the less likely they are to find these frightening as adults. Unless introduced early in life, cats will usually be scared of other animals such as dogs.

What you should do:

- If your cat likes people, provide regular contact with them even when you are away.
- Before getting a second cat, think carefully how your existing cat will respond to company. Check that you will be able to look after each animal properly and seek advice on the best way to introduce the new cat into the home.
- If you have cats that are not friends, make sure they have the opportunity to avoid each other and that they can access everything they need (e.g. food, water, outside space, litter tray, rest area) without having to pass one another too closely.
- Do not force your cat to interact with people or animals that it does not like, and make sure it can avoid them.
- If more than one cat shares a living space, provide sufficient extra resources (e.g. toys, beds, litter trays and hiding places) and give them enough space so that they can get away from one another if they want to.

- When you are away, make sure your cat is properly cared for by a responsible person. When someone else is looking after your cat they also have a legal responsibility to ensure its welfare, and you should ensure that they understand its needs and any special requirements that it may have.
- Never leave your cat unsupervised with another animal or person who may harm or frighten it.
- Ensure that cats in your care are handled properly and are not stressed or endangered by other adults, children or animals.

Section 5: The need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

What your cat needs

Cats feel pain and have similar pain thresholds to people. Individual cats show that they are in pain, frightened or suffering in different ways. For example, some cats become withdrawn and hide or change their eating and drinking habits, whereas others become aggressive or restless. Others develop unwanted habits, such as spraying or not using the litter tray. Other signs that your cat may be suffering from long-term stress include high levels of grooming or pulling hair out, withdrawal and a hunched posture. Cats that are insecure or stressed for long periods are more likely to become unwell.

Like us, cats benefit from regular health care. Long-haired cats and some others need help with grooming to avoid matting in their coat.

Cats are vulnerable to a range of infectious diseases and other illnesses. They need protection from serious infectious diseases, which can be provided by vaccination. Nosodes are another alternative to vaccination. Signs of illness include sudden changes in behaviour, such as restlessness and crying, or becoming quiet and withdrawn. Cats may stop grooming when ill and any changes in eating and drinking habits, such as lack of appetite or excessive drinking, may indicate problems. Changes in weight, either up or down should be investigated. Signs of injury include swellings, limping and evidence of pain, such as sensitivity to the touch. Other signs of illness include discharges from the eyes, ears or nose, difficulty with toilet behaviour, or sickness and diarrhoea. Cats that have eaten corrosive or poisonous substances often salivate excessively. This list is for guidance only and is not exhaustive.

A cat which goes outside, and which can be easily identified (e.g. by microchip), is more likely to be reunited with its owner if injured or lost. It is thus more likely to receive the prompt veterinary treatment it needs if injured.

Many people choose to have their cat neutered and this is recommended. Your vet can give advice about the age at which cats can be neutered and the health benefits of neutering. Un-neutered cats are more likely to fight, to catch some diseases as a result of fighting, and to be lost or run over whilst roaming. Cats frequently enter puberty at a very young age and unplanned early breeding may result in welfare problems. If you decide to breed your cat, your vet can give advice about the risks of inherited conditions that could affect the health of the kittens.

What you should do:

- If you notice changes in your cat's behaviour, including its eating habits, you should contact your vet and follow the advice you are given.

- Check your cat for signs of injury or illness regularly and make sure someone else does this if you are away. You should examine your cat closely, including its coat, which should also be checked for fleas or parasites. Preventative measures should be taken if appropriate. It is a good idea to have your cat screened for genetic conditions that may be common to the breed.
- Check your cat for good dental hygiene. Cats that develop inflamed gums, deposits on their teeth or bad breath may benefit from a health check by a vet.
- If you suspect that your cat is in pain, ill or injured, contact a vet promptly and follow veterinary advice regarding its treatment.
- Try to minimise fear and stress in your cat's daily life. By doing so you will decrease its risk of certain illnesses.
- You should take the advice of your vet on how often your cat needs a health check, and about the things you can do to protect your cat's health.
- Your vet is the best person to advise you about routine preventive healthcare, such as vaccination, neutering and treatments to control parasites (e.g. fleas and worms), as well as how to deal with any current health problems your cat may have.
- Make sure that you groom your cat without causing distress if it needs help with the care of its coat. If you are uncertain, ask your vet about grooming your cat and how often you should do this.
- Only use medicines and drugs that have been prescribed for your individual cat. Human products and medicines intended for other animals can be dangerous to cats and sometimes fatal.
- You should always contact your vet immediately if you are concerned that your cat has come into contact with any chemical or other substance that could be harmful. You should also be aware that cats regularly groom themselves and may ingest or come into contact with a poisonous substance when doing so.
- Make sure your cat can be identified so that it can be treated quickly if injured when away from home, or returned to you if lost. Make sure any collars fit properly and are not harmful. If using a microchip as a form of identification, remember to keep the microchip database up to date with any changes in your contact details.
- Seek the advice of a vet before allowing your cat to breed. You should take all reasonable steps to ensure that you will be able to find homes for kittens. Unwanted kittens should never be drowned.

ANNEX 1: Sources of further information

The structure and relevant contact details for enforcement of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 is set out on the DARD web site at the following link:

[Enforcement for the Welfare of Animals Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#)

Legislation

Links to relevant legislation

- [Welfare of Animals Act \(Northern Ireland\) 1972](#)
- [Welfare of Animals Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#)
- [Noxious Weeds \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1977](#)
- [The Welfare of Animals \(Transport\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2006](#)
- [Council Regulation \(EC\) No 1/2005 on the Protection of animals during transport and related operations](#)

Additional Information

- Your vet. You can contact the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons to find details of vets in your area: www.rcvs.org.uk – the website has a “find a vet” facility.
- Local libraries and bookshops for up to date books on cat care.

Websites such as:

Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour:
<http://asab.nottingham.ac.uk/>

Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors:
www.apbc.org.uk

Blue Cross:
www.bluecross.org.uk

British Veterinary Association Animal Welfare Foundation:
www.bva-awf.org.uk

Cats Protection:
www.cats.org.uk

DARD website:
www.dardni.gov.uk and www.direct.gov.uk

have information on the Welfare of animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, Pet Travel Scheme (PETS) and copies of the Code of Practice for the Welfare of Cats.

Other useful websites are:

Feline Advisory Bureau:

www.fabcats.org

PDSA:

www.pdsa.org.uk

Pet Care Trust:

www.petcare.org.uk

Pet Food Manufacturer's Association:

www.pfma.org.uk

Pet Health Council:

www.pethealthcouncil.co.uk

Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals:

www.uspca.co.uk

The Cat Group:

www.thecatgroup.org.uk

Petlog:

www.petlog.co.uk