

# The hidden side of buying cats online

Emily Fowler looks at the risks involved in rehoming cats and kittens advertised privately on internet sites

**T**he 2015 Manifesto for Cats from Cats Protection, the UK's largest feline charity, includes a point about 'breeding for sale' that talks about the thousands of cats and kittens advertised for sale on major online classified sites, suggesting that some pet owners are commercially breeding their cats over and over again. According to the Manifesto, the number of unwanted litters of kittens handed over to Cats Protection adoption centres in the UK increased by 19 per cent between 2012 and 2013.

While animal charities and rescues with cats and kittens for adoption achieve great results using their websites and social media accounts as a way to 'advertise', they have the knowledge, experience and proper procedures in place to make sure any cats that are adopted are fully prepared for adoption, including the relevant vaccinations and neutering, and that all potential adopters are vetted for suitability. Sadly, when private individuals sell cats or kittens online, they're often motivated by money rather than the welfare of the cats in their care. Not getting a pet cat spayed and letting her go outside

## So what are the problems associated with selling cats and kittens online?

The risks of buying kittens online:

- Health issues caused by poor welfare
- Kittens being removed from mother cat too early, leading to health and behavioural problems
- It encourages pet cats to be bred until their bodies can't take any more
- No support following the sale, unlike when you adopt from a rescue

will almost always result in a litter of unwanted kittens, which irresponsible cat owners can then sell, either via online classified sites or in social media 'buy and sell' groups (which are often set as private, so it's even harder to regulate them).

## Ed and Sheeran's story

Ginger and white kittens Ed and Sheeran were brought in to Cramar Cat Sanctuary ([www.cramarcats.org.uk](http://www.cramarcats.org.uk)) in Birmingham, because their new owner was struggling to give them the care that they needed. Their owner had seen them advertised for sale on one of the major online classified sites, and had only had them for a short time before giving them up to Cramar.

Cramar Supervisor Rachael Clements was shocked when they arrived at the sanctuary, as she knew that they'd been advertised as healthy nine week old kittens.

The reality of the situation was very, very different.

Ed and Sheeran were only around five weeks old, both covered in fleas and with severe worm infestations and upset tummies. The care they needed was very intensive and something that the new owner wasn't prepared or equipped to do, as Rachael explained: "They weren't eating on their own and they couldn't keep themselves hydrated. They had to have lots of hands-on care, feeding, fluids and regular bathing as they had such horrific diarrhoea. We immediately treated them for fleas and wormed them but they also needed antibiotics to help clear up the tummy bug they had. It took three weeks before they fully got over everything."

The simple fact is that these kittens should never have been re-homed at such a young age and in such a poor state of



health, and Rachael said there was even more to it than that. "They also should not have been so poorly at such a young age in the first place. This will be down to lack of proper care for mummy cat and kittens, even before she had given birth to them."

If a pet owner is being motivated by money to let their pet moggy have kittens over and over again, it stands to reason that the welfare of the animals is going to be low on their list of priorities. In this case, and thanks to the specialised and dedicated care from Rachael and the team at Cramar Cat Sanctuary, brothers Ed and Sheeran are now fully recovered and have found a happy and responsible forever home together.

## Thinking of advertising your cat online?

The risks aren't only on the buyer's side when it comes to advertising cats and kittens online. There are sometimes situations that leave responsible cat owners having no other option but to rehome their cat and, although advertising online as 'free to a good home' may seem like an easy option, it's not in the best interest of the cats. Anyone can answer an online ad and offer to rehome a cat but how do you know that the offer is genuine or that the potential adopter is a suitable pet owner?

People who are looking to adopt a cat or kitten from a recognised rescue or sanctuary pay an adoption fee in return for a cat that has been neutered (if old



enough), vaccinated and tested for health problems. Potential adopters are also subject to home checks, so the rescue can fully satisfy themselves that the cats in their care are going to a responsible home.

If a cat is given away 'free to a good home' to someone who's seen it advertised online, it could be going to new owners who haven't really thought through what it means to adopt an animal, don't have the right knowledge of feline welfare or the desire to learn what their new pet needs to be happy and healthy. Even worse, there are always rumours of free cats and kittens being used as bait for dog fighting, snake food or laboratory testing, and whether these things are commonplace or not, is it worth the risk?

### Cats Protection's view

I asked Jacqui Cuff, Cats Protection's Advocacy Manager, about the charity's view on the subject: "We always encourage anyone who advertises a cat or kitten on a website or in a newspaper to do so responsibly and ensure the cat or kitten went to a suitable home. We don't have any legal powers to compel websites or newspapers not to advertise cats or kittens, but we are part of the Pet Advertising Advisory Group (PAAG), a group made up of animal welfare organi-

sations, media publishing companies and the Metropolitan Police, which promotes responsible pet advertising. PAAG is aware that pet advertising is an issue for many publications and websites and they assist them to promote best practice, provide uniformity and transparency and ultimately, improve the welfare of the animals being bred, bought and sold via newspapers and websites.

"PAAG requests that publishers carry some advice alongside any advertisements for sales of animals. The advice on buying cats and kittens is viewable at [www.paag.org.uk/publishers/](http://www.paag.org.uk/publishers/). This advice is available to Cats Protection's network of branches and centres so that they can use it to encourage their local websites to advertise responsibly.

"Regarding Cats Protection's use of the Internet, we know it is a useful tool to highlight the cats in care which need new homes although we would never use the Internet alone to rehome a cat. We always carry out certain procedures, including a home visit where appropriate, to ensure that each cat goes to a suitable environment. We also have an 'adopt with confidence' pledge, which means prospective owners can be confident that any cat adopted from us has benefited from the very highest standards of care and attention. Each Cats Protection cat will have been examined by a veterinary surgeon,

microchipped, vaccinated, neutered if old enough and will also come with four weeks' free insurance. We provide these benefits so people don't have to worry about them following adoption, which is a big plus for money-conscious owners."

### Hidden motives

As well as buying kittens online encouraging 'backyard breeders', there are always other risks associated with contacting people through adverts. I heard about a situation recently where photos of poorly looking kittens were put up on a classified site, and when someone contacted the advertiser to try to help the poor kittens, she was subjected to harassment that required police involvement. It transpired that the kittens didn't exist, it was just an unpleasant and possibly dangerous individual wanting to get women's contact details, and using the lure of sick kittens as bait.

Sadly, as long as unscrupulous sellers continue to make money selling kittens online, the more likely they are to continue letting their cat get pregnant. Not only does this mean UK rescues are fuller, with less cats in their care able to find a forever home, but the poor cat being used to breed over and over again will be more likely to contract diseases through sexual contact and have a higher risk of gender specific cancers. 🐾