

THE CAT GROUP POSITION STATEMENT

Cat Cafes

The Cat Group is a coalition of organisations dedicated to improving the welfare of cats in the UK. Through joint campaigns and influencing using our collective knowledge, we make expert recommendations on the care and keeping of cats.

Summary

The Cat Group is concerned about the welfare of cats residing either permanently or temporarily in UK cat cafes. Cat cafes are establishments which allow customers to interact with cats who roam freely within the cafe. Cat cafes expose cats to multiple risk factors (see below) for stress and health impairment. We believe the accumulation of multiple risk factors and the prolonged or recurrent exposure to these risk factors make it extremely difficult for cat cafe environments to provide cats with a good quality of life.

Key risk factors

There is a complex, multifactorial relationship between cat wellbeing and various social and environmental factors (1). Each cat is an individual and their temperament, current health status and experiences during early socialisation will affect how they perceive and respond to stressors. There is also variation between cat cafes, in group sizes, environmental provision, husbandry regimes, operational procedures and rules. Considering evidence-based understanding of the biology and behaviour of cats we believe cat cafes present the following risk factors:



Conspecific social stress from enforced proximity

Although domestic cats as a species have a flexible social system with some cats choosing to form affiliate bonds with others, their descent from a solitary and territorial wildcat means many individuals can find the presence of unrelated cats a source of stress (2). Group housing means the cats have no choice or control over who they live with and there is no evidence-based method for assessing which cats will be friendly together or incompatible (2). Conflict amongst cohabiting cats is linked to a range of welfare issues (3) and choosing even one incompatible individual has the potential to increase the stress levels of others within the group (4). To help cope with conspecific conflict, when living together, cats often prefer to use distance-increasing strategies i.e. avoidance (1). However, opportunities for this may be difficult within the defined and limited space of a cat cafe and avoidance of a conspecific stressor may lead to encountering another type of stressor e.g. a customer, loud noises etc. A lack of access to outdoor space which is typical in cat cafes further limits opportunities for avoidance. Even if cats can effectively avoid physical contact with each other they may still be adversely affected by their presence within the same territory. Conspecific social stress may not always be obvious and can be present even where no overt signs of conflict are seen (5) e.g. staring has been found to be a frequent sign of conflict (6). These factors can make it more challenging for recognition and remedial action.



Conspecific social stress from a changing population

Some cat cafes facilitate cat adoption. Whilst well meaning, these cafes operate a 'rolling population' as adopted cats leave the cafe and new cats looking for homes join. It is known that familiarity and relatedness are important factors when cats choose to form friendly groups (7). Non-group members are rarely tolerated and generally avoided or will have

aggression directed towards them (8). This suggests new cats entering the cafe are unlikely to be warmly received and when asked, many owners report observing signs of conflict when cats are introduced (6). In addition, familiarity, predictability and control are important for cats to feel safe, comfortable and to reduce stress (9). However the ever-changing social dynamics caused by a 'rolling population' will likely reduce these important factors. Cat welfare and behaviour experts recommend that a slow, gradual and structured process is followed for introducing cats. This is to help increase the likelihood of successful long-term affiliative relations (3). We are concerned that the layout and operation of a cat cafe may make following appropriate introductions more challenging.



Competition and sharing of resources

Cats within a cat cafe are required to share essential resources including litter trays, elevated resting spots, hiding places, food and water. Cats may share some resources across time but not always at the same time, with other cats who they perceive to be in their social group. However sharing is not extended to cats outside of their social group (10). Where resources are viewed as limited, cats may guard and defend (10). To reduce competition, and the associated bullying and stress, sufficient numbers of extra resources should be placed in different locations so each individual can access essential resources whilst avoiding other cats (9, 11). These important stress-reducing steps are likely to be challenging in a cafe environment where space for customers and food/drink preparation must also be considered. Recurrent guarding and defending of resources causes chronic social tension and may result in some individuals failing to access enough of what they need (12). This could have a direct impact on their physical and/or mental health.



Exposure to and/or handling by unfamiliar people

Typically cats in cat cafes are frequently and repeatedly exposed to unfamiliar people. Customers will likely wish to interact with them and may handle them. Cat cafes often provide 'rules' around what is/isn't acceptable but these are variable, voluntary and subject to the cafe's capacity to monitor compliance. Cats who are not well socialised to people or who have timid temperaments, are likely to find the enforced exposure to and handling by unfamiliar people stressful (5). Even well

socialised cats may find it stressful due the frequency and unpredictability of the interactions. It can be difficult to identify cats who are stressed by handling since individuals who appear to 'tolerate' it can still have high physiological stress levels (5). Therefore there is a risk that stress from handling may go unnoticed.



Poor health and disease

The group housing of cats in a public setting such as a cat café presents distinct health challenges, particularly when there is introduction of new cats to the environment. The close contact between multiple cats and frequent interactions with visitors increase the risk of infectious disease transmission, including upper respiratory tract infections, dermatophytosis (ringworm), gastrointestinal pathogens, and retroviral infections such as feline leukaemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). Robust biosecurity measures, vaccination protocols, and regular veterinary screening are essential to mitigate these risks.

In addition to infectious concerns, the social and environmental stressors as outlined above can negatively impact feline wellbeing. Prolonged or unmanaged stress may contribute to the development of stress-related conditions such as feline idiopathic cystitis, gastrointestinal disturbances, and dermatological issues including overgrooming and alopecia. Chronic stress also impairs immune function, increasing vulnerability to infectious disease.



Welfare problems not identified in individuals

In an environment which exposes cats to multiple risk factors it is important to observe and assess individual cat welfare so that swift and remedial action in response to early signs of stress can be taken. However, identification of individual welfare problems may be challenging to capture in a cat cafe because; multiple cats are sharing communal resources

making it hard to keep track of eating, drinking and toileting; and because cats are known to hide outward signs of pain/illness (9).



Sensory stress

The sensory aspects of the cat cafe environment including smells, sound and lighting are potential stressors. Sounds generated from food and drink preparation and from customers can make them noisy places. If located on a busy street or shopping centre this also has the potential to add to the noise levels. Cats may also be able to see and/or hear passing dogs from the cafe windows too. Loud noises have been found to increase fear related behaviour in shelter cats (13) and it's possible that cats in cafes could be equally affected. Cats require many hours of sleep per day (12-20 hours) which they get intermittently throughout the 24 hour period (polyphasic) (14). It's possible that loud noises or other sensory stimuli from the cafe (lights, vibrations) may make it more challenging for the cats to get the sleep they need. In addition, customers visiting the cafe will have unfamiliar smells on them (from their homes, pets, perfumes etc) and we are concerned that this may be an additional stressor for cats as they have a very sensitive sense of smell.

Regulation of cat cafes

Cat cafes are currently regulated through the 'Keeping or training animals for exhibition' licence under The Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulation 2018 (15) (and equivalent devolved legislations). The statutory guidance for local authorities to use when issuing licenses under this scheme has limitations and we do not believe that possession of a licence alone is evidence of good cat welfare. Examples of these limitations include, but are not limited to, an absence of guidance on; how cats should be responsibly sourced, how new cats should be introduced, nor do they address appropriate measures for cats that cannot cope with the environment.

Steps can be taken to reduce the likely occurrence of the above risk factors. However, we believe that sufficient reduction of all risk factors would require substantial changes to the usual cat cafe business model and set-up. Such substantial changes would likely significantly alter the customer experience and possibly the economic feasibility/success.

Sources of cats

We are concerned that cats are not always sourced responsibly to live in cafes. For example, there is at least one example of cats being imported for this purpose. In addition, since rescue and rehoming centres in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are not regulated, it is unclear whether cat cafes can ensure that cats are from a reputable source. Some cat cafes have a cat area and a kitten area.

The use of cats for entertainment purposes

In addition to our concerns regarding cumulative and recurrent risk factors, the Cat Group is also concerned about the use of cats for entertainment purposes. Cat cafes may be great places for human wellbeing but we believe that the use of cats for entertainment in this environment fails to recognise and respect cats as sentient beings with their own behavioural, cognitive and emotional needs.

References

The references below are reproduced from the supplied position statement. Where a web address was supplied, it is clickable.

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