

Strays, surrenders, and fostering: New Zealand's cat rescue landscape

Christine Roseveare¹, Carolyn Gates²

¹School of Health Sciences, Massey University, Wellington; ²School of Veterinary Science, Massey University, Palmerston North

Introduction

New Zealand has one of the highest rates of companion cat ownership worldwide, with more than 1.2 million cats included in 40% of households. About a third (37%) of these animals come from rescue organisations involved in managing and rehoming New Zealand's population of stray, abandoned, and surrendered animals (Companion Animals New Zealand 2024). While large numbers of animals pass through rescue organisations, there has been limited research describing the New Zealand cat rescue landscape and the significant challenges these organisations face. This study provides the first national overview of Cat and Kitten Rescue organisations (CKR) in New Zealand, examining their capacity, processes, and their reliance on foster care networks.

The findings have implications for veterinary practice, as many veterinarians work with rescue organisations and treat animals that have passed through their care. For full details of the study and findings see Strays, surrenders, and foster care: Examining New Zealand's cat rescue landscape (Roseveare and Gates 2025).

Methods

A national cross-sectional survey was conducted with companion animal rescue organisations in New Zealand in May 2022. Of the 64 organisations that indicated they cared for cats, 50 (78%) completed the section focusing on cat rescue activities. The survey collected data on: types and numbers of cats cared for, facilities, locations, origins of and outcomes for cats in care, reasons for owner surrender, whether the CKR had a foster programme, and rescue capacity. Data analysis consisted of descriptive statistics for quantitative variables and thematic analysis of free-text responses.

Results

Fifty CKR reported caring for 6,206 cats at the time of the survey, with most organisations (74%) reporting they were 'usually' or 'always' full to capacity. The majority (80%) operated foster programmes, with 59% of all cats in their care located in foster homes rather than shelter facilities.

Sources of cats

Stray cats were the predominant source of animals entering CKR, representing a median of 72% (IQR 50–93%) of all admissions. Owner surrenders accounted for a median of 14.5% (IQR 5–31%), with the primary reasons being:

1. Unwanted animals (especially unplanned litters)
2. Lack of pet-friendly accommodation
3. Inability to afford the animal's daily needs

CKR reported a clear seasonal pattern in intake, with the highest number of requests for their services occurring during the summer months (December to March), aligning with 'kitten season' in the Southern Hemisphere.

Organisational services

CKR in New Zealand provided a range of services beyond rehoming, with 74% also operating trap-neuter-return (TNR) programmes. Most organisations implemented health checks (74%), parasite control (86%), and temperament assessments (78%) as part of their intake processes.

Limiting factors

Foster carer availability was identified as the most critical factor limiting intake capacity, followed by financial resources. This highlights the central role that foster programmes play in the New Zealand cat rescue system, with the median number of fosterers available to each organisation being just six (IQR 4-20).

Outcomes

The median rehoming rate across CKR was 66% (IQR 60–80%). Other outcomes included animals still in care (median 10%), released as part of TNR projects (median 8%), and euthanised (median 3%).

Discussion

This study reveals the significant work being done by CKR in New Zealand, caring for thousands of animals annually with limited resources. The predominance of stray cats in the intake population highlights the need for initiatives focused on both owned and unowned cat populations. The significant reliance on foster care networks is a distinctive feature of New Zealand's cat rescue landscape. With 80% of organisations operating foster programmes and 59% of cats housed in foster homes, the availability of fosterers emerged as the most critical resource limiting the capacity of CKR to accept animals. The findings also highlight the interconnection between human circumstances and animal welfare. The reasons for owner surrender—including housing constraints and financial pressures—reflect broader social determinants affecting both human and animal wellbeing. This points to the value of potential collaborative approaches between the veterinary and human health sectors to address these shared challenges.

Implications for veterinary practice

For veterinarians working with rescue organisations or treating animals that have passed through them, our findings have several practical implications:

1. Preventative focus: The high proportion of unplanned litters and stray cats surrendered to rescues reinforces the importance of early desexing programmes, microchipping, and owner education to reduce the number of animals entering the system
2. Policy engagement: Veterinarians can support local policy initiatives promoting mandatory microchipping and desexing requirements being considered by many city councils to address the stray cat population. Support for initiatives to address financial and housing constraints help people maintain their relationships with companion animals during challenging circumstances.

As New Zealand considers developing a nationwide cat management framework, the insights from this research could inform approaches that address both stray and owned cat populations, supporting both animal welfare and the sustainability of rescue services.

References

Companion Animals New Zealand. Companion Animals in New Zealand. *NZ Pet Data Report 2024*
Roseveare C, Gates MC. Strays, surrenders, and foster care: Examining New Zealand's cat rescue landscape. *New Zealand Veterinary Journal* 1–10, 2025