



*PAWS*for THOUGHT

A dog isn't just for Christmas – or lockdown, or any other time. A dog is for life. That's a message Newcastle Dog & Cat Shelter are keen to share as we discover how we can support them in their 125th year



Images © Amy Bagnall @aebphoto unless otherwise stated

‘If they can work on supporting people and their pets, fewer animals may be left seeking a new home’



Newcastle Dog & Cat Shelter was established in 1896, and for the last 125 years they’ve helped lost, unwanted, neglected, abused and abandoned animals – and pride themselves on finding forever homes for them, and helping to prevent cruelty to animals. Covering the whole of the North East from their two shelters within Newcastle (Claremont Road and Benton North Farm), they also help reunite lost animals with their owners.

As we head to their rehoming centre at Benton North Farm, we have that phrase ‘a dog is for life, not just for Christmas’ in mind. But as we’re greeted by donkeys, pigs, Houdini the goat, and even bees (to highlight just a few of the animals here) – and there’s plenty more we want to know about the shelter. After a tour, and being introduced to a friendly husky, some lively rabbits and three happy-to-be-petted horses, Chief Executive, Chris Bray, shows me to his office where more dogs await (these ones belong to the staff) – including Rosie, who greets us with a friendly tail wag.

Chris joined the team in January (some of the staff have worked for the shelter for more than 20 years), and he’s been blown away by his experience so far. ‘The way we’re able to spend time with these

animals and understand them better, and provide care and find them forever homes is incredible,’ he says. ‘It’s an amazing privilege to be able to do what we do. Being new to the team, I’ve been able to ask questions that may not have been asked before and it’s nice to explore doing things slightly differently.

‘One of the challenges around the pandemic has been loneliness for people, and animals have provided them with an amazing sense of support. We know from experience that a pet brings so much to families, and especially individuals who may be isolated. Whether it’s a budgie or hamster or a dog or cat, just that sense of having some companionship is so important.’

Newcastle Dog & Cat Shelter is one of the oldest organisations in our region, and is now in its 125th year – but it’s still important to spread the word about what they do. ‘In part, it’s quite sad that we do still exist if I’m being really honest, because it means animals still need our help,’ Chris admits. ‘You’d like to think after 125 years that society would have changed a bit, but it hasn’t. The big achievement for us is telling our story and growing our reach.’ Now, as they reopen the shelter’s doors for visitors, there’s plenty to share with the community.

The majority of animals that come through the shelter’s doors are either gifted to them and come from owners who may be struggling for a variety of reasons, or are strays who come in after they’ve been found abandoned or lost without a microchip. Chris tells us that the shelter doesn’t rehome over Christmas, but makes it clear that they’re always there to help and advise those who may be struggling to cope with pets. ‘We never want to see an animal in distress, or in an environment that isn’t healthy, so the important thing is that we’re here and people can pick up the phone and speak to a member of our staff to get some advice, because sometimes that’s enough in itself,’ he explains.

Once an animal has been health checked and is fit and well, the team spend time with them to understand them a bit more – because every animal has its own character and personality. It’s only when they’ve got to know them better that they can help them find the perfect home. Prospective owners are asked plenty of questions to enable the team to make the right decision as to where that animal will be best placed – that goes for dogs, cats, rabbits and any other animal waiting to be rehomed.

There are farm animals here too – clearly Newcastle Dog & Cat Shelter would never say ‘no’ to an animal in need of somewhere to stay, as they may have no alternative. ‘If we’re not the right place for a farm animal, we’ll look for an alternative,’ Chris says. ‘We have a network of contacts to help if it comes to that, but we’ll always take an animal in if there’s a need – that includes snakes too (which we’ve had at the shelter in the past). We’d never say no, but we’re not always the best full-time destination for some.’

What Chris has learned from his time at the shelter is that if they can work on supporting people and their pets, fewer animals may be left seeking a new home. ‘It’s not uncommon that some people can’t afford to feed their pet, and if we can help with short-term support to prevent having to give an animal up, we will,’ Chris explains. ‘A lot of what we can do going forward is working more closely with the community to educate and support them.’ Chris uses his background in palliative care as an example. ‘I was aware of some people who have pets being more concerned about where their pet would go than about themselves. If we can help with cases like this, then that’s just another way we can help the community,’ he says.

But, of course, the shelter can only keep going if that support is returned, and what better time to highlight that than at Christmas – a time for giving. ‘The community are very generous,’ Chris says. ‘We do get a lot of food donations and that’s very generous but we have plenty of food. What we do need more of is funding to enable us to do the work we’re really good at. That’s why fundraising is so important to us.’ That’s why the shelter are encouraging any donations, no matter how small. ‘Where we need significant support is in updating our facilities, both here and at Claremont Road. By improving the facilities we can improve our quality of care for the animals. We’d love to work with local businesses big and small to improve our site. In two or three years time, I’d like to think that we’ll be here in a site that has been massively improved.’ Funding will help improve the cattery, parking facilities and energy use, among other vital aspects of the shelter.

‘The menagerie of animals means Benton North Farm is a great place to educate people. That’s why they’re looking into new ways to get more of the community to visit’



Our visit to Newcastle Dog & Cat Shelter was truly eye opening, and we agree with Chris when he says the best way to understand what they do is to go there and see for yourself, as the menagerie of animals means Benton North Farm is a great place to educate people. That’s why they’re looking into new ways to get more of the community to visit – including Christmas markets. One person who helps to spread the word about such events is Andrea Wylie, a trustee of the shelter who describes herself as a ‘super fan of the work they do.’

‘I always have been,’ Andrea says. ‘I would go at lunchtime when I worked locally and spend my time walking around and wishing I could take them all home. I knew one day I would do something that could make a difference. I was absolutely delighted when I was accepted as a trustee. I love the animals and I felt that I could do my bit to help out a charity that’s close to my heart and is local too.’

Andrea finds the rehoming of animals the most rewarding part of her involvement and describes her fellow trustees as ‘caring’ and ‘loyal’. She speaks highly of the shelter’s supporters too. ‘We are very lucky in the fact our supporters send us toys and food over Christmas,’ she says.

‘We are also very fortunate that, because of our association with Mars Pedigree and Whiskas, they generously donate all our food, so as a result we never run out and always have excess.’

Reflecting on Christmas time, Andrea says ‘an animal should be part of your family for the rest of its life’ and that a decision to adopt or buy a pet should be taken seriously. ‘It’s okay to ask for a pet for Christmas, but is the hectic season really the best time, when your house is manic and you’re probably going to be out a lot? There are so many things to consider. Just be really, really honest with yourself and do the right thing. Wait and wait again until the whole family is absolutely 100 percent sure it’s the right thing and the right time. And, of course, it helps to visit the shelter after Christmas and see which animals are available for rehoming. Come and meet them and the staff and really do your homework and research into the breeds you are interested in.’

As Newcastle Dog & Cat Shelter continue to grow their following, and share their success stories on social media, we encourage you to follow them. Find out more about what they do, and the animals they help at dogandcatshelter.com. All animals looking for new homes are at the Benton North Farm Shelter.