

What is Open Paw?

Open Paw is a programme developed for cats and dogs in rescue centres. Open Paw has been in existence in the United States since it was founded in 2000, by Kelly Gorman Dunbar, a respected behaviourist in the US and her husband Dr Ian Dunbar, a British behaviourist and author. The National Animal Welfare Trust is the first rescue and rehoming charity in the UK to become an Open Paw organisation.



The aim of the programme is to provide our animals with the enrichment, training and social skills they will need to make them more rehomeable and to enable them to successfully settle into life in their new homes. On top of this it also provides practical hands-on training for staff and volunteers and for prospective and existing pet owners, thus educating local communities on responsible pet ownership and training.

Quite understandably rescue organisations – including NAWT – have had a tendency to view the animals cared for almost like they are unlucky ‘inmates’ and so we focus our efforts on making their stay as comfortable as possible. However, Open Paw focuses on continuing the good social skills the animals have learnt in their previous homes, such as toilet training, as well as teaching them the new social skills they will need to appeal to a new owner. So instead of ‘inmates’ they become the lucky ‘students’ at NAWT’s ‘university of life skills’.

What does Open Paw Offer?

The programme sets Minimum Mental Health Requirements for each animal in our care to ensure they are receiving sufficient enrichment to help keep them calm but mentally stimulated and in the right frame of mind for learning whilst in our care.

Open Paw also provides practical hands on training for staff and volunteers working with our animals and also for prospective pet owners. This is delivered through a structured four level training programme as well as daily grooming and handling.



Open Paw provides training for the animal, NAWT staff and volunteers and potential owners.

Why are you confident Open Paw will work?

Open Paw has a track record of success in the 15 years since it was developed in the US.

Also recent research shows that when potential owners look for a rescue dog they spend about one minute in front of each kennel before deciding whether to meet that dog or to move on.

They like the dog to be at the front of the kennel, facing them and being calm, not barking or jumping up.

Once they meet the dog outside the kennel they make a decision within 8 minutes. They like to be able to play with the dog and once play is over, they like the dog to lie quietly beside them.

Open Paw teaches the dogs all these skills so it will help them find a new home quicker.

How did NAWT introduce Open Paw?

We introduced the Open Paw programme for dogs first as the programme was much more fully developed and tested than the cat programme. As this was a very new way of working, we ran a pilot in the intake kennels at NAWT's Watford Centre in July 2015, and then gradually rolled it out to the rehoming kennels at Watford. In Autumn 2015 Somerset and Cornwall became the next Open Paw centres, with Berkshire and Clacton following in early 2016.

We are now working with cat behaviourists to develop a feline version of Open Paw with the plan for all of our catteries to adopt the Open Paw programme by the end of 2017.

What is different with Open Paw?

There are some major differences in the way we now work with the animals:

Toilet Training

The programme allows for regular toilet breaks during the day which enables us to either continue the dogs' existing habits or teach them new ones. We have designated toileting areas and dogs visit there before doing any training or going on a walk. This teaches them great habits for their new home, and also teaches them to be clean in kennels.

Cleaning Routines

Traditionally we have hosed out every kennel every day but because the dogs are now clean in kennels we are able to 'spot clean' each day and deep clean once a week or when the kennel is vacated, whichever is sooner. This benefits the dogs in two ways, firstly 'spot cleaning' means familiar smells are not all cleaned away which helps the dog feel more at home, and as the animal care staff are spending less time on cleaning they can spend more time working with the dogs.



Dogs are encouraged to toilet in designated areas, instilling good habits for their future homes.

Feeding

With Open Paw we throw away the food bowls! Mealtimes have been the highlight of a dog's stay in rescue, but meals in bowls are usually consumed within seconds and the pleasure has passed. By feeding a meal in an interactive toy like a Kong, the mealtime takes longer and is more mentally stimulating.

With Open Paw at NAWT breakfast and dinner are served in Kongs, and lunch will be in a Kong or some other interactive feeder like a treat ball or dog maze.



Meals are fed in Kongs or similar interactive toys under the Open Paw programme.

Of course we won't let a dog go hungry if he or she cannot eat from anything but a bowl.

On top of this, we save some of the dog's daily food allowance to put into containers on the front of the kennels in the morning and afternoon. This food is used in Level 1 training which is described below.

Training

Open Paw provides a structured training programme for the dogs, staff and volunteers. It comprises four levels as follows:



Hand feeding part of the daily feed ration builds a positive relationship with people approaching the dog's kennel.

Level 1 – Hand feeding kibble from the container on the kennel when passing the kennel regardless of the dog's reaction. This teaches dogs to enjoy people approaching their kennel and they naturally start to 'present' themselves well to prospective owners.

Level 2 – Teaching dogs to be calm when people enter and exit the kennel, including putting on the lead

Level 3 – Teaching basic commands and manners including handling and play

Level 4 – Teaching dogs to walk calmly on a loose lead, even when meeting people and other dogs

The great thing with Open Paw is that everyone can do Level 1 training, even visitors walking round the centre.

What results has NAWT seen from Open Paw so far?

We are delighted to say that we saw great results very quickly with Open Paw.

Within 24 hours we noticed the dogs on the pilot were calmer, the noise level of barking had dropped significantly and the dogs seemed more relaxed. Most of the dogs were clean in their kennels within that time span, although a couple took a few more days to learn.

Animal Care Staff are spending a lot less time on cleaning and more productive time training the dogs who have responded well. All bar one of the 12 dogs in the pilot were happy to eat out of Kongs and the one that couldn't was an elderly dog with hardly any teeth! We have now found other alternative feeders that are easier for elderly dogs to use but still provide mental stimulation.

The biggest difference we have seen is when the dogs were moved to the rehoming yard. Whilst other dogs not on the scheme continued to jump up and bark as people passed, the Open Paw dogs remained calm, sitting at the front of their kennels looking forward to the next visitor, or just relaxing on their beds. A "before and after" video shows a clear difference and this can be viewed on our YouTube channel ([youtube.com/user/NAWThq](https://www.youtube.com/user/NAWThq))

And the best news is that of the first six dogs that moved to the rehoming block, four were reserved within the first week.

Get involved with Open Paw

NAWT is looking for volunteers to be trained to work with us on Open Paw.

We also need donations of Kongs and interactive toys as these are crucial to the success of Open Paw and we welcome people who are interested in learning more about the transformative programme in order to spread the word in the community.

Call 020 8950 0177 to get involved

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