

# Responsible cat ownership

## Messaging guide

6 October 2020

### 1. Introduction

**This guide provides recommendations for messages to encourage responsible cat ownership. It is for all those who have an interest in encouraging responsible cat ownership, including conservationists, veterinarians, animal welfare organisations, Councils, territorial authorities and community groups.**

The recommendations outlined in this guide are based on the [Common Cause approach](#) to community engagement. This approach to developing effective and persuasive messaging is based on decades of research from the fields of social psychology, cognitive linguistics and behavioural economics.

A key aspect of the approach is a recognition that most people are able to think about any issue from *multiple and often conflicting perspectives* – these are known as *cognitive frames* (or *frames* for short). Importantly, these frames operate at a subconscious emotive level. The purpose of strategic communications is to tap into *helpful frames* in people that increase their likelihood of supporting a cause because it changes the way they feel about the issue. Motivating cat owners to be responsible, therefore, requires tapping into helpful frames for the issue and avoiding engaging frames that make people feel, either consciously or not, that what we are suggesting is wrong or doesn't apply to them.

In order to identify these key frames, we conducted an audit of existing guides for cat owners, social media stories and comments and online news articles, followed by a workshop with advocates for responsible cat ownership from a range of organisations<sup>1</sup>. Through this process, we identified frames that are likely to be helpful and unhelpful to the cause, as well as two overarching messages or stories. These are “umbrella” messages that can be adapted by a range of government and advocacy organisations in their communications. The messages can also inform the way grassroots groups talk to people in their community about the issue.

### 2. Messaging principles

This guide is built on Common Cause messaging principles derived from a large body of research into values and frames as well as principles from the fields of behaviour change and communications.

The Common Cause framework applies the research on human values to promoting public concern about social and environmental challenges. It draws on an abundance of cross-cultural research into values along with linguistics and framing theory, and new research into the effects of values and life goals on attitudes and behaviours.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Predator Free New Zealand Trust, Wellington City Council, Auckland City Council, New Zealand Veterinary Association, Royal New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), Zealandia.

<sup>2</sup> See *Common Cause: The Case for Working with our Cultural Values*, available at [www.valuesandframes.org/downloads](http://www.valuesandframes.org/downloads)

The research finds that values tend to cluster into sets that are associated with different attitudes and behaviours:

- **Intrinsic values**, centred around caring for others and independent thought and action, are associated with greater support for a range of social and environmental issues
- Conversely, **extrinsic values** such as wealth, power over others and preserving one’s public image are associated with less support for these issues
- **Security values**, activated when safety and stability are perceived to be threatened, are also likely to engage neighbouring extrinsic values and are linked with fear rather than pro-social action.

**Based on the values science, messages that engage audience’s intrinsic values of Benevolence, Universalism and Self-Direction are likely to be helpful in motivating responsible cat ownership.** Below we outline concepts central to responsible cat ownership that are likely to engage these values.

Benevolence values	Universalism values	Self-direction values
<p><b>Caring for those in one’s immediate circle</b></p> <p>Includes values of responsibility, helpfulness, true friendship, mature love and meaning in life:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Responsible cat ownership” means looking after a cat, which can invoke values of responsibility, friendship and love</li> <li>• “Family”: caring for cats as family members</li> <li>• “Home”, which can include both house and yard, invokes feelings of care, security, warmth, comfort and contentment.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Caring for nature and community, beyond one’s immediate circle</b></p> <p>Includes values of protecting the environment, unity with nature, equality and broadmindedness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beyond the home, family and pets, this includes concern for wildlife, being community-minded and creating harmonious neighbourhoods.</li> <li>• “Keeping your cat happy and healthy without roaming from home will help ensure harmony for everyone – you, your cat, neighbours, and local wildlife.”<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>	<p><b>Independent thought and action</b></p> <p>Includes creativity, curiosity and choosing own goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This includes owners being inventive in creating their own inexpensive DIY cat entertainment areas indoors and outdoors, such as the owner who catproofed her backyard herself with no previous experience.<sup>4</sup></li> </ul>


Beyond values and frames, the messages presented in this guide incorporate several other principles relevant to cause-based messaging:

Principle	Applied to cat ownership	Good examples
Engage intrinsic values, avoid extrinsic and security values	Responsible cat ownership	“Keep your cat <b>happy and safe at home</b> ” “ <b>Happy cat, happy wildlife.</b> ”
Focus on the solution more than the problem	Focus on the behaviours of responsible cat owners, more than the	“Make your cat <b>conservation friendly</b> ” – a quiz outlining responsible behaviours <sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> SPCA: Keeping your cat safe at home

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/119528003/auckland-woman-catproofs-backyard-on-the-cheap>

<sup>5</sup> Department of Conservation, <https://www.doc.govt.nz/get-involved/conservation-activities/make-your-cat-conservation-friendly/>

	damage done by irresponsible owners and their roaming cats	“Fun activities to do with your cat”
Show what you want, not what you don’t want	Cats happy and entertained at home, not on the prowl hunting	
Normalise responsible behaviour	Tell the story that many owners <i>are</i> responsible and doing the right thing	“ <b>Many owners now provide</b> a safe and enriching environment for their cat at home all day, every day” <sup>6</sup>
Agency to make a difference	By being a responsible cat owner, you can make a real difference	“The Dunedin research ...found that placing bells on cats <b>halved the number of birds caught...</b> By being responsible cat owners, <b>we can make a real difference.</b> ” <sup>7</sup>
Use emotion to connect with audience’s values	The things that really matter to us: love, family, and life in all its wonder	“It would be <b>heart-breaking</b> to see any of our precious birds killed” <sup>8</sup> “It’s heart-breaking to see cats injured while roaming”
Avoid negation (“it’s not...”) and mythbusting, which reinforce unhelpful concepts	Unhelpful concepts include pro-versus anti-cat people, e.g. “We’re <b>not anti-cat</b> ” <sup>9</sup>	“We want the best for <b>cats and wildlife</b> – and we can have both”
Avoid hedging, which conveys a lack of certainty or conviction	“Might”, “probably”, “consider”, e.g. “ <b>You should consider keeping</b> your cat contained for his/her safety, and that of local wildlife” <sup>10</sup>	“ <b>We recommend you keep</b> your cat at home...”

### 3. A journey

**Over time, our messages will help take cat owners on a journey.**

Our starting point, where many NZ cat owners are currently ‘at’, is that letting cats roam is good for their welfare. Whether owners choose to keep their cats at home or not is at their discretion.

Where we’d like cat owners to get to is always keeping their cats at home, because that’s where cats are happiest and healthiest. Further, we are asking owners to change how they think of their cat, their cat’s role in the home, and setting up their house and yard to provide an excellent standard of welfare and ensure their cat’s life is enriched. In order for cats to be content at home, they require plenty of love and attention and ways of entertaining themselves. This represents a key attitudinal and behavioural shift for many cat owners; without it, it

<sup>6</sup> SPCA: Keeping your cat safe at home

<sup>7</sup> Forest & Bird: Cat factsheet

<sup>8,9</sup> Clare St Pierre: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/waikato-times/life-style/111278180/pirongia-residents-implored-to-protect-kkako-from-domestic-cats>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.sPCA.nz/advice-and-welfare/article/creating-an-enriching-home-environment-for-your-cat>

is true their cats may not be happy at home. Encouraging such behaviour change requires work beyond the remit of effective messaging. In this guide we identify messaging that can support it.

We also have work to do to reset relations, given that the conversation to date has sometimes bred division. Helpfully, we can frame responsible cat ownership as something that benefits everyone – it is in the best interests of cats, owners, neighbours and wildlife. Our messages can also start out by acknowledging owners’ love for their cats, both to engage Benevolence values and to build solidarity rather than coming across as “anti-cat”.<sup>11</sup>

Given the need to build solidarity and the size of the attitudinal and behavioural changes required of cat owners, these shifts are likely to take several years. We can hasten them by normalising the behaviours, for example by showing how owners are already fully providing for their cats’ needs at home, and by working with trusted messengers like vets to make keeping cats happy at home a core part of the narrative of cat care.

## 4. Our story, many versions

Frames are strengthened through repetition. Every time a frame is engaged in us, it become a little bit stronger and more likely to be activated the next time we think about that situation or issue. Therefore, telling common stories of responsible cat ownership and why it matters will help establish a useful dominant frame among New Zealanders.

Telling a common story doesn’t mean using the same language and set of words every time in every context. It’s important to tailor our messages to the different audiences we are communicating with. Instead, telling a common story means *activating the same set of ideas and values*. For example, if we asked 100 people to write the story of David and Goliath, it’s unlikely they would all use the exact same words, but they would no doubt communicate a similar set of ideas and values.

Below we outline recommended ways of portraying the players in our responsible cat ownership story, followed by two versions of the story:

- One centred on **cat welfare**, well suited for vets and animal welfare organisations to tell;
- The other emphasising the wellbeing of both cats and **wildlife**.

The *Story Elements* column represents key concepts we should all be including in our communications as much as possible. The *Example* column is simply one example of how these concepts might be communicated in practice. It is up to you to decide whether this wording will work for your audience or whether a different way of articulating these story elements would be more effective in your context.

Below we provide a recommended story structure of ‘**Vision – Barrier – Action**’ that helps us focus our story on the positive *outcomes we seek*, rather than *problems we face*. This structure may not be appropriate in all contexts. Yet, while the order of the elements may change based on the channel of communication, advocates should aim to incorporate as many of the story elements wherever possible.

Beyond the message elements, we know that the messenger matters. Social research into responsible cat ownership in New Zealand and overseas reveals that veterinarians and fellow cat owners are likely to be trusted and influential messengers for our story. In the messaging tables below, we present the different angles various messengers can weave into their messages.

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<sup>11</sup> A good example: “Forest & Bird recognises the important role cats play in New Zealand society. Cats provide companionship and other positive benefits. Many Forest & Bird members own cats.” [Forest & Bird’s Cat Policy]

Overall, our task is to convey that responsible cat ownership applies to all owners, since all cats can cause harm to themselves and others by roaming. Over time, by setting up responsible cat ownership as the expected default behaviour for all, cat roaming and hunting will become an aberration, outside accepted norms and expectations. In order to reinforce the idea that responsible cat ownership applies to all, it would be helpful for a diverse range of owners to tell their stories.

Story elements	Example
<p><b>PORTRAYING CATS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cats are happiest and healthiest at home</li> </ul>	<p>Domestic cats thrive in human company, as members of our families. They are happiest and healthiest in our homes, with plenty of love and stimulation. Cats are adaptable – that’s one of the reasons people domesticated them. The way we raise them is the world they know and who they become.</p> <p>As domestic pets, our cats have everything they need in the home. They have the security of a loving, stimulating home and meals with their human families. Cats are happiest and healthiest at home.</p>
<p><b>PORTRAYING CAT OWNERS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We love our cats and we are responsible for them</li> <li>- We want the best for cats, neighbours and wildlife</li> </ul>	<p><i>[Benevolence and Universalism values]:</i> We are all types of people. The thing we share is we love our cats. We share our lives with cats – they are our companions and family members. When we welcome a cat into our lives, we take on the responsibility of caring for it. As responsible cat owners, we also want our neighbours and wildlife to enjoy their lives and thrive.</p> <p><i>[Self-Direction values]:</i> We are creative problem-solvers who love a good challenge – how can we create a great home for our cats?</p>
<p><b>PORTRAYING VETS AND ANIMAL WELFARE ORGANISATIONS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We want the best for animals: cats and wildlife</li> </ul>	<p>We love animals. We can help you care for your cat in ways that are best for them, your neighbours and local wildlife. Ask us when you next visit, or see our guides online.</p>
<p><b>PORTRAYING CONSERVATIONISTS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We want the best for animals: cats and wildlife</li> </ul>	<p>We love animals. Many of us are cat owners and we value their companionship at home. We want both cats and wildlife to thrive.</p>
<p><b>PORTRAYING COUNCILS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We help create great communities</li> </ul>	<p>We help create great communities. We want the best for cats, neighbours and wildlife. On behalf of our community, we set rules for cat ownership so we can all live together well.</p>

## Cat welfare story

Story elements	Example
<p><b>VISION</b>            (What we want and why it matters)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Happy and healthy cats at home, harmonious neighbourhoods</li> </ul>	<p>Cats are important companions who are happiest and healthiest at home with plenty of love, attention and stimulation. Imagine harmonious neighbourhoods where cats lead rich, satisfied lives at home, and owners enjoy their company and their antics.</p>
<p><b>BARRIER</b>            (The barrier to what we want)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Roaming cats</li> </ul>	<p>But if we let out our cats to roam, they can get into trouble and cause trouble for others. They can fight with other cats, get attacked by dogs, tangle with cars, poo in neighbours' gardens, and spread diseases and parasites.</p>
<p><b>ACTION</b>            (How can we address the barrier)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Responsible owners provide everything cats need to be happy and healthy at home</li> </ul>	<p><i>[cat owner to owner]:</i> As responsible cat owners, we can make a huge difference. The health and wellbeing of our cats is in our hands – we can provide everything they need for a full and happy life at home. I've chosen things that work for me and my cat: indoor scratch toys and a catio. For you it might be cat-proof fence tops. Find out how at your local veterinary clinic SPCA centre or Council.</p> <p><i>[vet/SPCA/Council to owner]:</i> All of us want the best for cats, neighbours and wildlife. Many cat owners are already providing everything cats need for a full and happy life at home. We can help you to do this too. Find out how at your local veterinary clinic, SPCA centre or Council.</p>

## Wildlife story

Story elements	Example
<p><b>VISION</b>            (What we want and why it matters)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Happy cats at home and thriving wildlife</li> </ul>	<p>All of us want both happy cats and thriving native wildlife.</p> <p>We New Zealanders love our unique and special native species found nowhere else in the world. Many are at risk of extinction and it's up to us to look after them.</p> <p>We want our native animals to go about their daily lives in peace: playing, finding food, and raising their families. They want to survive and thrive, just as we do.</p>
<p><b>BARRIER</b>            (The barrier to what we want)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Roaming cats harm and kill wildlife</li> </ul>	<p>But if cats are let out to roam, they can cause havoc. Even cats that are well fed are likely to hunt, often maiming or killing our native creatures.</p>
<p><b>ACTION</b>            (How can we address the barrier)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Responsible owners provide everything cats need to be happy and healthy at home</li> </ul>	<p>As responsible cat owners, we care for our cats at home so that our native animals can also be happy and safe in their homes. [X organisations/guides] can help you provide everything your cat needs for a full and happy life at home.</p>

## 5. Unhelpful messaging to avoid

Some unhelpful messaging is simply the opposite of the helpful messaging outlined above, such as suggesting responsible cat ownership only applies to some cats, or that it is “anti-cat”.

Other unhelpful messaging includes:

- **“Home cat”, “house cat”**: using descriptors like these unhelpfully implies another version of “cat” that does not stay at home. Instead, just saying “cat” reinforces the expectation that all cats stay at home – the default.
- **“Cats hunt wildlife”**: suggests that it’s natural and inevitable. This could be reframed: “if cats are let out of the home, they often maim or kill wildlife”.
- **Dangerous world**: An undue emphasis on the dangers of cats roaming off-property may unhelpfully engage audiences’ Security values, reinforcing that ‘it’s a dangerous world out there’. Instead, focus on the good things owners contribute to creating (happy cats, neighbours and wildlife), more than the dangers to be avoided.
- **Freedom for cats**: In our responsible cat ownership frame, cats are happiest at home, and how we raise them is who they become. Conversely, words such as “confined”, “contained” and “free to roam” are unhelpful, as they invoke an oppositional frame that cats want freedom: they want to roam, and keeping them “confined” goes against their natural desires. It suggests that cats want to break free of the constraints and confines of the home. Instead of such terms, simply use “at home” or “inside”.

## 6. Community conversations

The principles and messages outlined in this guide can form the foundation for written communications as well as conversations between grassroots advocates and cat owners. Below we offer some general principles for having constructive conversations about responsible cat ownership<sup>12</sup>.

To further inform our advice, we would love to hear your experiences of conversations in the community, so that we can understand what tends to happen and how we can respond: the ways of establishing common ground and losing it, the behavioural asks that people accept, those they balk at, and why.

- As noted earlier, the messenger matters. Portray yourself in three dimensions (e.g. animal lover, cat/pet owner, mother, avid soccer player) rather than just one (conservationist).
- Start from a place of empathy, acknowledging cat owners’ love for their cats.
- Especially in the first part of the conversation, seek to understand where your conversation partner is coming from. Listen more than you speak. Generally, people love talking about their pets if they sense genuine interest rather than attack or blame. Ask a question or two to show your interest in their cat as a being with a personality, e.g. “what’s your cat’s favourite pastime at home?” (also priming the conversation about happy cats at home).

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<sup>12</sup> For an example of these principles applied to conversations about climate change, see George Marshall’s video with a summary at 16:30 minutes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qp-nJBwQR4>



- Build common ground and shared values. A perfect place to start is your cat, if you own one. If not, you and your conversation partner might live in the same area and have an interest in that community doing well and being an enjoyable place to live. It's also likely you will both love animals.

Tips on objection handling (e.g. "my cat doesn't hunt", "catios don't suit us")

- Share your personal journey: e.g. "I used to let my cat roam because she didn't bring home any wildlife. Then I found out many cats kill a lot more than we ever see, and I found ways to keep her happy at home". Or: "When we were growing up, everyone let their cats roam. Then we realised all the fights they were getting into, and how unhappy the neighbours were about cat poo on their lettuces. Since then, all the ways to keep cats entertained and happy at home have come along leaps and bounds."
- Show, don't tell: Show your or other owners' indoor cat entertainment, catios and cat-proof fence tops. This will speak volumes about what's possible and expected of cat owners, without lecturing people about what they should or should not do. Have these images ready on your phone or printed out.
- Be ready to outline a range of constructive solutions to objections. You don't need to be an expert, just to get across the idea that there are many ways to keep cats happy at home and others (e.g. vets and SPCA) can help with this.

Remember that what we're asking of cat owners – keeping their cats at home – presents a big change for many people which they may find confronting. In a short conversation, you are unlikely to change their mind and their behaviours. Rather, your goal is to plant seeds. You want them to walk away from a pleasant and thought-provoking conversation feeling positive and open to finding out more.

Give your conversation partner something practical they can take home to help those seeds grow, with weblinks and contacts for further information. Ideally, community conversations will be held within a larger program of behaviour change initiatives so that others can follow up with practical support. A larger program could also include ways of normalising responsible cat ownership across the community, for example by featuring owners building catios on TV home renovation shows and in traditional and social media.