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**From:** Jacquie Rand  
**Sent:** Wednesday, 22 January 2025 5:33 PM  
**To:** Animal Welfare  
**Cc:** Jenny  
**Subject:** RE: Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales - Extension for post-hearing response - Australian Pet Welfare Foundation

Hello,

Please find my response to the Take on Notice questions and Office of Local Government recommendations

Let me know if there are any questions related to these responses.

I would be grateful if you could acknowledge receipt of this email. I will send the transcript corrections shortly and some other useful documents for the inquiry panel.

Kind regards,

*Jacquie*

Emeritus Professor Jacquie Rand, BVSc (Melb), DVSc (Guelph), MANZCVS  
Diplomate, American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine  
Executive Director & Chief Scientist  
**Australian Pet Welfare Foundation**  
*Improving the health and wellbeing of pets, people and their environments*





Australian  
**Pet Welfare**  
Foundation

# Inquiry into the Management of Cat Populations in NSW

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AUSTRALIAN PET WELFARE FOUNDATION

Emeritus Professor Jacquie Rand, BVSc (Melb), DVSc (Guelph), MANZCVS  
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**Executive Director & Chief Scientist**  
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Website: [www.petwelfare.org.au](http://www.petwelfare.org.au)

17 January 2025

## **Inquiry into the Management of Cat Populations in New South Wales- Hearing – 16 December 2024.**

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) is a peak research and advocacy organisation for pet welfare in Australia and is a not-for-profit. APWF uses **rigorous scientific knowledge and research to enhance community well-being and improve the health and welfare of animals and people**. By adopting a One Welfare approach, our research looks for strategies which balance and optimise the wellbeing of animals, people and their environments. This includes investing in evidence-based solutions to prevent euthanasia of healthy companion animals in shelters and pounds and the associated mental health damage to staff and community residents. We share research knowledge with the community, shelters and pounds, federal, state and local governments and veterinarians to create change and save animal and human lives.

Australian Pet Welfare Foundation is led by Chief Scientist Dr. Jacquie Rand, Emeritus Professor of Companion Animal Health at The University of Queensland (UQ) and a registered specialist veterinarian in small animal internal medicine. She has worked extensively in shelter research over the last 17 years, including collaborative studies with the RSPCA, Animal Welfare League and local governments. While at UQ, **Dr Rand** taught Urban Animal Management and since 2013 **has co-authored over 32 peer-reviewed articles on urban animal management including management of semi-owned and unowned cats**.

You can read more about us and our vision on our website: <https://petwelfare.org.au>.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide further information by providing supplementary information.

In response to the “Take on Notice” questions:

1. *Can you tell us about some of the high-intensity desexing programs you have been involved with in New South Wales specifically (including, for example, in Greenacre in the City of Canterbury Bankstown) – what have been the measurable outcomes of these NSW-based desexing programs?*

The Australian Community Cat Program is an initiative of the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation to promote and share information with animal welfare organisations and all levels of government to enable them to implement and document the benefits of urban cat management based on an assistive rather than an enforcement approach combined with high intensity desexing programs targeted to areas of high cat impoundments or cat-related calls to council.

The NSW program, initiated by RSPCA New South Wales (NSW) in partnership with eleven councils as part of project “Keeping Cats Safe at Home”, was funded by the NSW Government through its Environmental Trust. The program has been very successful in reducing intake of cats into pounds and the RSPCA shelter. As part of our monthly Australian Community Cat Program meetings which I chair, I was involved in

assisting with initial discussions between myself, RSPCA NSW staff and international experts on choice of locations that would be most appropriate to initiate a Community Cat Program, and discussions on appropriate intensity (numbers desexed per 1000 residents) and microtargeting. **Greenacre, in the City of Canterbury Bankstown** was chosen because it had demographics, population size and physical boundaries to be an ideal pilot location. Following implementation by **RSPCA NSW** of a high intensity, free desexing program targeted to locations of high cat intake in Greenacre, after just one year, **cat intake was reduced by 31%, whereas** in the same time period, cat intake increased by **7% for the rest of the shelter**. This saved RSPCA NSW approximately \$100,000 in sheltering costs (RSPCA NSW Report 2023). Subsequent to this pilot program, the city of Paramatta, (population 256,000) implemented a Community Cat Program which resulted in a 46% reduction in intake of cats and kittens to the RSPCA Sydney shelter, a 41% reduction in cats arriving at the council pound, and a 49% reduction in cat-related nuisance complaints to council. In two small country towns (Weddin; human population 3608 and Walgett; human population 5250), cat-related nuisance complaints to council decreased by 66% and 91% respectively after 1 year, indicating **these programs had significant and rapid impacts in reducing issues associated with roaming cats and unwanted litters of kittens**.

Scientific evidence, including from Australia, repeatedly demonstrates that Community Cat Programs effectively **reduce the number cat-related complaints** and cat impoundments overtime when they are targeted to areas of high complaints or cat impoundments, and performed with high intensity (Cotterell 2021, APWF 2021, City of Banyule 2020, Spehar & Wolf 2019, Gunther 2021, Boone 2019, Kreisler 2019, Swarbrick 2018, Levy 2014, Tan 2017 and Levy 2003). For example, recent Australian data demonstrate that Community Cat Programs are cost effective and result in a **30-50% decrease in cat impoundments by local governments, more than an 80% reduction in cat euthanasia and a 30-50% decrease in cat nuisance complaints over 3 to 4 years**, with these parameters reflecting the decrease in the surrounding free-roaming cat population (Cotterell 2024, City of Banyule 2020, RSPCA NSW 2023, Rand 2024).

In Australia, Community Cat Programs have been shown to be very effective at both the suburb and city level in urban areas to decrease cat impoundments and cat-related complaints. For example, between 2013 and 2021, **the City of Banyule**, Victoria used a combination of a community assistance rather than enforcement approach for cat management, combined with a micro-targeted approach for the desexing strategy, and over that 8-year period, **impoundments decreased by 66% and euthanasia by 82%**. Banyule **spent \$77,660 on desexing, but saved \$303,490 from reduced cat intake** into their service provider's facility (Cotterell 2024). The program has also resulted in further saving of **\$137,170 to council for reduced cat-related calls**, with the **total estimated saving \$440,660** (Cotterell 2024). The program successfully transformed semi-owners into full owners. This is a highly effective intervention strategy that is currently under-utilised, and represents a significant opportunity to increase rehoming and reduce unnecessary euthanasia, at a lower cost compared to first impounding and then rehoming cats. These results from the Community Cat Program in the city of Banyule contrast with the 143% and 296% increase in cat impoundments associated

with implementation of mandated 24/7 cat curfew in the Yarra Ranges and Casey, Victoria (APWF 2022, City of Casey 2021, Yarra Ranges Council 2018).

**In the city of Ipswich, Queensland, the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF)** initiated in 2020 a Community Cat Program based on offering free desexing, microchipping and preventative health care for all cats in three suburbs with a total population of 38,000 residents. Data from a small rural town (Rosewood) with approximately 3000 residents within the local government (council) area of the city of Ipswich has just been published (Rand 2024). **In the third year, after 308 cats were desexed (representing 94 cats/1000 residents over 3.4 years), this was associated with a 60% decrease in cat intake, an 85% reduction in numbers euthanised and 39% fewer cat-related calls to the local council, at a cost of \$2/resident per year for desexing costs.**

Recent published data **over 4 years from camera-traps (motion-detecting cameras) demonstrate a decrease of 37% to more than 50% in the numbers of free-roaming cats over time in the 3 suburbs (population 38,000) with Community Cat Programs**, consistent with the decrease in number of cat-related calls to council (unpublished data Dutton-Regester 2024). Collectively, these results demonstrate compelling evidence of the effectiveness of Community Cat Programs in resolving the issues associated with free roaming cats in urban areas.

2. *Do you feel it is fair to bring in punitive cat containment laws during a cost-of-living crisis? If not, please explain why.*

Mandated containment laws disproportionately impact low-income households and renters, criminalise pet ownership for vulnerable groups and impose financial burdens, particularly during a cost-of-living crisis, because in these areas residents may have little or no capacity to comply. If enforced, it may result in cat owners having their cats impounded or relinquishing their companion. Cr Cadwell from the city of Greater Geelong stated after the council rejected mandated 24/7 containment “The financial cost burden the policy would have imposed upon residents on low fixed incomes may have required them to give up their cat, which in many cases may be their only companion. That’s not something I could support, particularly in a cost-of-living crisis” (van Oorschot 2024)

For example, regarding the financial capacity to comply in suburbs with high free-roaming cat numbers, in the suburb for the pilot Community Cat Program in Rosewood, Ipswich, based on 2021 census statistics, the individual median weekly income was \$636/week, a larger proportion of residents lived in rental accommodation than the Australian average (41% versus 30.6%), and a higher proportion of renter households had rent repayments greater than 30% of household income (38.4% versus 32.2%) (Rand 2024). Cat containment systems often cost between \$700 and \$2000 or higher, making it highly unlikely a low-income household can afford one if it is needed. Because of lack of affordability, mandated containment is a barrier to semi-owners taking ownership of a stray cat and effectively makes cat ownership illegal for many low-income owners, perpetuating the “it’s not my cat” response.

Cat containment should be encouraged and facilitated but not mandated. Owners can be messaged to provide their cats with a last “bedtime” meal indoors. At little or no cost to the owner, this method trains the cat to come inside at night when the door outside can then be closed. Night-time containment is effective in protecting wildlife of conservation concern susceptible to cat predation, because most are nocturnal in urban areas of Australia (APWF 2023; NSW Government), and nighttime is also when problematic cat behaviours are most likely to occur. Where native species of conservation concern are located in urban and peri-urban areas, other options include assisting cat owners with the construction or costs of cat-proof fencing or enclosures. Electronic fencing (hidden fencing) may be less expensive for some properties. It is not subject to restrictions for modifying rental properties, and key components can be relocated to another property. It can also be used around doors or windows to stop “door dasher” cats escaping. If used correctly, electronic fencing is not associated with welfare issues (Kasbaoui 2016) and therefore it should be legalized where it is not yet permitted.

Mandated 24/7 cat containment has been widely recognized as an ineffective and inequitable strategy for reducing roaming cat populations. Local governments, such as Bayside Council, Hume City Council, Hobsons Bay Council and Greater Geelong Council in Victoria, have decided against implementing these policies due to their impracticality and the disproportionate burden they place on low-income residents. As Cr Cadwell from Greater Geelong council noted, the financial strain of compliance could force residents, particularly those in rental housing, to relinquish their cats, often their sole companions, especially during a cost-of-living crisis (Bayside 2024, Hobsons Bay 2014, Hume Council 2018).

Evidence from the United States further supports this stance, as many jurisdictions repealed similar “leash laws” after finding them unenforceable (Smithfield, Virginia USA 2003, Edmonds City Washington USA 2012, Hughes 2002, Alley Cats Allies 2022). Containment policies fail primarily because most free-roaming cats are strays or semi-owned cats without identifiable owners. For owned cats that are currently not contained, compliance is often unachievable due to property restrictions, financial constraints, and concerns for the welfare of confined cats. These barriers discourage semi-owners from assuming full responsibility for stray cats, which is a proven strategy to reduce free-roaming populations.

It is important to note that of owned cats in NSW, **contemporary data shows that 65% of cat owners contain their cats 24/7 and another 28% do at night** (Ma 2023). Therefore, 93% of cats are contained at least some of the time, with only 7% not contained at least at night, which is when species of conservation concern susceptible to cat predation in urban and peri-urban areas are active and when most problematic nuisance behaviours occur. This further highlights the issue of free-roaming cats is not predominantly due to owned cats.

**To effectively reduce the number of free-roaming cats it is critically important to understand the cause of the problem, otherwise ineffective and costly solutions will be proposed,** such as mandated containment. The very fact that 93% of pet cats

are contained at least at night and 65% are fully contained, indicates that mandating containment will not be effective in reducing the number of free-roaming cats and associated issues (Ma 2023). Many of the people not currently containing their cat likely do not have the capacity to do so, but more importantly, the issue of free-roaming cats is not the result of irresponsible owners. It is that most of the cats are stray cats with no owner to contain them. Without this understanding of the underlying problem, appropriate solutions will not be implemented. Mandated cat containment laws, including 24/7 curfews, are ineffective in addressing free-roaming cat populations or associated issues such as nuisance complaints and wildlife predation. Evidence from Australia and internationally, including the RSPCA's 2018 report (RSPCA Australia 2018), shows no measurable reductions in these areas following the implementation of such regulations.

Data from the City of Yarra Ranges (Yarra Ranges 2018), demonstrate that complaints increased by 143% and impoundments rose by 68% within three years of introducing a 24-hour curfew, further illustrating the failure of containment laws to achieve their intended outcomes. These laws are also fundamentally unenforceable. Most free-roaming cats are semi-owned cats and some are unidentified owned cats, meaning no owner can be identified to be held accountable. Trapping programs, which form the backbone of enforcement, are costly, time-intensive, and largely ineffective. Councils such as Hume City (Hume 2018) and Hobsons Bay (Hobsons Bay 2014) have publicly acknowledged the impracticality of enforcing containment laws, with limited resources and no sustainable way to address the underlying issues. Containment policies increase costs for local governments because they increase nuisance complaints.

Additionally, containment laws create numerous negative consequences, including increased euthanasia of healthy cats due to a lack of rehoming options, heightened mental health challenges for animal management staff, and barriers to adoption for semi-owners. They also significantly increase costs for local governments while failing to reduce free-roaming populations over time. Instead of punitive measures, evidence supports alternative strategies like high-level desexing programs and community engagement initiatives to resolve cat-related complaints. These approaches address the root causes of free-roaming cat populations in a humane, cost-effective, and sustainable manner. The government should focus on implementing these proven strategies rather than ineffective and inequitable containment laws.

Mandatory containment laws can also lead to unintended negative consequences for cat welfare. These include increased impoundments, higher euthanasia rates, and welfare issues for some confined cats, such as obesity, and urinary tract diseases, as well as behavioral problems which often result in abandonment or surrender. Furthermore, there is concern because when these laws are enacted, there is a community expectation they will not, or should not, see wandering cats. If councils are unable to respond to the increased cat-related calls, it increases the risk of the public obtaining cat traps which are relatively inexpensive. The result is increased risk of cruelty toward wandering cats. Trapped cats may be dumped at pounds or shelters, or of greater concern, dumped in the bush or left to die in the trap cage.

**Recommendation-** The APWF strongly opposes mandated cat containment laws. These are not based on an understanding of the cause of the problem (e.g. low socioeconomic, disadvantaged cat owners who are unable to comply and semi-owned stray cats) and therefore these policies fail to reduce free-roaming cat populations. Instead, they increase complaints and costs for local governments, and create barriers to humane, community-based solutions. Alternatively, APWF recommends approaches such as high-intensity, targeted desexing programs which reduce nuisance behaviours and stop kittens being born to add to the free-roaming cat population, combined with an assistive approach to resolve nuisance issues. In addition, we recommend providing practical information on the benefits and method of bedtime feeding of cats to facilitate nighttime containment. Instead of mandated containment, use targeted anti-nuisance laws where necessary when an assistive approach fails. These strategies are more equitable for disadvantaged residents and are shown to be effective and sustainable in addressing cat-related issues, whereas mandated containment laws are ineffective and costly.

3. *A claim was made at the Inquiry that education about keeping cats indoors doesn't work unless it is supported with punitive cat containment laws. Have you found that education without punitive laws do work when coupled with other aspects such as desexing, and if so, what is your response to claims that these measures won't work without punitive legislation?*

Punitive cat containment laws have not been shown to work. This is because they are based on the false belief that it is irresponsible cat owners who are the cause of the problem. Contemporary NSW data show that 93% of pet cats are contained at least at night and 65% are fully contained. Understanding the problem of free-roaming cats is critical to solving it; most free roaming cats are in low socioeconomic areas and are stray cats being fed by compassionate members of the community, and some are unidentified owned cats, often owned by lower income tenants in properties poorly suited to 24/7 containment of cats.

Education itself is rarely effective in decreasing free roaming cats because **it is not lack of knowledge but lack of capability to contain some cats**. Targeted information has been shown in scientific studies to have some success in getting behaviour change for those cat owners who have some capacity to contain their cat. However, additional punitive cat containment laws are ineffective in achieving measurable benefits in decreasing free-roaming cats.

Effective cat management strategies rely on well-structured messaging that highlights both the benefits of effective containment actions and the potential impacts of inaction, particularly relating to pet health, social and environmental consequences **combined with providing information on practical and inexpensive methods of containing cats, for example, using bedtime feeding to facilitate nighttime containment**. Messages that emphasize the positive impacts of behaviours including containment, desexing and microchipping, alongside the risks of not taking these actions such as car accidents and increased risk of being impounded, can influence public perception and encourage participation (McLeod 2019). Localized messaging,



delivered by trusted community members, enhances credibility and increases engagement by making the issue more personally relevant. However, facilitating the behaviour change by overcoming barriers which are generally cost and accessibility factors is essential for behaviour change. For example, by providing free desexing for cats combined with messaging that female cats can be pregnant by 4 months of age. Conversely, coercive measures like fines or restrictions for non-compliance can reinforce the importance of participation, but disadvantaged cat owners and carers may have no capacity to comply or to pay fines. Similarly **funding educational material when cat owners or carers have no capacity to contain their cat or get it desexed is a waste of government funding.**

For cat management to be successful it must align with broader human and animal welfare and environmental goals. Punitive laws, which target cat owners, fail to address the reality that the majority of free-roaming cats are semi-owned stray cats. Identified owned cats are not the primary contributors to wandering populations and associated issues as evidenced by pound reclaim rates –96% of cats are not claimed by owners (Chua 2024). The claim that education does not work without punitive laws overlooks the underlying cause of the problem and the barriers faced by many cat owners and semi-owners, such as financial constraints and property limitations. Assistive programs that provide practical support, such as free or low-cost desexing services, have proven far more successful in achieving behaviour change. **Punitive laws**, by contrast, risk alienating communities, **increasing cat relinquishments, and exacerbating the issues they aim to solve, as well as increasing costs to local governments.** There are fewer free-roaming cats in wealthier suburbs, fewer cat-related calls per 1000 residents and fewer cats and kittens being impounded or surrendered. In these suburbs, residents have greater capacity to install cat containment systems. Where nuisance complaints are received, an assistive approach based on mediation until all parties are satisfied is a more appropriate and successful approach and anti-nuisance laws can be used if an assistive approach fails. **Mandated containment laws are unnecessary and anti-nuisance laws are more appropriate and targeted to resolve problem situations.**

By integrating effective strategies, cat management initiatives can achieve greater community buy-in and long-term success. Evidence from various programs (Rand 2024, Cotterell 2024, RSPCA NSW 2024) shows that accessible desexing, coupled with targeted assistive community campaigns, leads to significant reductions in complaints associated with free-roaming cat populations and decreased cat impoundments and euthanasia. The **RSPCA NSW’s “Keeping Cats Safe at Home” program funded by the NSW Government has been an outstanding success using a two-pronged approach – provision of practical information on cat containment along with targeted free cat desexing and microchipping programs.** High-level desexing programs paired with community outreach have consistently reduced the number of free-roaming cats being impounded and cat-related calls to councils. Assistive programs encourage semi-owners—those who feed and care for stray cats but do not perceive ownership—to take full responsibility, including desexing and microchipping. This approach addresses the root causes of free-roaming cat populations more effectively than punitive containment

laws, which often discourage semi-owners from engaging in taking ownership due to fear of penalties.

Supporting cat owners, particularly those facing financial hardship, with the costs of containment fencing or enclosures is a practical and effective strategy for protecting species of conservation concern. Many vulnerable native species, including ground-dwelling birds, small mammals, and reptiles, are at risk from free-roaming cats, in urban and peri-urban areas. Providing financial assistance, subsidies, or grants for cat-proof fencing or assisting in their construction can help overcome economic barriers for disadvantaged residents, ensuring that responsible pet ownership is accessible to all, not just those who can afford it. This approach not only safeguards native wildlife but also reduces the burden on local councils and conservation programs that respond to cat-related predation issues.

By investing in proactive solutions like containment fencing where species of conservation concern are present, governments can achieve dual benefits—supporting social equity while strengthening conservation efforts to protect Australia’s unique biodiversity. To best protect threatened species, it is recommended that citizen science and existing databases be compiled, and together with camera trap data for confirmation, detailed maps of locations of native species of conservation concern be created at the street and property level, and specific targeted protection be actioned for the relevant species. For example, based on documented causes of mortality for an individual species (NSW Government), possible actions include assisting cat owners with containment enclosures, providing information through mail box flyers, SMS messaging and doorknocking to encourage dogs to be kept inside at night, providing appropriate plants for resident’s gardens and consideration of reduced speeds for motor vehicles. **Protection of threatened and endangered species is a community responsibility, and it should not be expected that individuals fund this cost.**

**Recommendation:** Provide practical information on cat containment and its benefits based on scientific evidence from the NSW Keeping Cats Safe at Home research, combined with supportive measures like cat desexing programs and community outreach. This is a proven, humane, and inclusive approach that addresses the complexities of managing free-roaming cat populations while fostering public cooperation and trust. Punitive cat containment laws are ineffective and are a barrier to effective cat management strategies because they discourage semi-owners from taking ownership of the cats they are caring for. It is strongly recommended that funding be provided for detailed mapping of locations where species of conservation concern reside in urban and peri-urban areas, and targeted science-based strategies are implemented that will best protect those species.

*4. The inquiry received evidence that councils should be given the power to introduce cat containment laws now, even if they are ‘not commenced for some time’ by individual councils because they do not have the capacity or ability to enact or enforce them. Do you have any concerns with the suggestion of changing the legislation now despite local councils not being in a position financially or otherwise to be able to uphold them? – if so, can you please explain why? Could this cause further problems for*

*councils if they were pressured to enact the laws when they do not have the resources to be able to do so?*

Pressure to implement containment laws is based on lack of understanding by the community and at all levels of government of the underlying causes of free-roaming cats. Unless the underlying causes are addressed, effective solutions will not be implemented. Granting councils the authority to implement cat containment laws, even if not immediately enforced, raises significant concerns, as it fails to address the underlying causes of free-roaming cats and related issues, making it an ineffective solution. A long-term study in the City of Armadale, Western Australia (Lilith 2010), examined the impact of different cat regulations on the diversity and abundance of small and medium-sized mammals in urban bushland. The study compared three areas with varying cat management strategies: a no-cat zone (where cat ownership was prohibited), an area with cat curfews and compulsory bells, and an area with no cat-related regulations. These regulations had been in place for approximately ten years prior to the study. Researchers also analyzed structural and floristic vegetation features at each site to determine their influence on mammal populations, both independently and in relation to cat activity.

The findings revealed no significant differences in species diversity across the sites, and population statistics for Brushtail Possums and Southern Brown Bandicoots—the most abundant medium-sized mammals—were similar in all areas. Notably, the smaller Mardo (*Antechinus flavipes*), considered the most susceptible to cat predation due to its size, was most frequently trapped in the area without cat regulations. Additionally, the total number of mammals captured was highest in the unregulated cat area, which also had denser vegetation. The study concluded that pet cats did not negatively impact species diversity or abundance at these sites and that vegetation characteristics were likely more influential in determining wildlife populations. Furthermore, cat-related bylaws, including prohibitions on cat ownership, provided no measurable benefits to native wildlife conservation.

Rather than implementing containment laws, a more effective approach to urban cat management involves investing in community-based solutions. For example, supporting community assistance initiatives to resolve cat-related complaints and increasing access to desexing programs which reduce nuisance behaviours and stop kittens being born to contribute to the free-roaming cat population. In parallel, provide practical information on simple methods of cat containment such as bed-time feeding. Without adequately trained staff in community engagement skills or sufficient funding, assistive programs may fail. However, evidence shows that containment laws do not address the root causes of the issue and may instead place undue pressure on councils to enforce regulations they are not equipped to manage. This can lead to higher impoundment numbers and the unnecessary euthanasia of healthy cats that damages the mental health of animal management officers (AMOs) and shelter and pound staff.

A proactive, community-driven approach that prioritizes accessible and humane management strategies is more likely to achieve sustainable, long-term outcomes for

both cats and wildlife. Furthermore, introducing mandated containment legislation risks unintended consequences, such as increased cat relinquishments as well as financial burdens on low-income households unable to comply with containment requirements. Councils may also experience heightened community tensions, as punitive measures disproportionately affect vulnerable populations and fail to address the fact that the majority of free-roaming cats are semi-owned stray cats.

The RSPCA NSW's "Keeping Cats Safe at Home" is an outstanding example of what works. After just one year in the program targeted to **Greenacre, Canterbury-Bankstown, cat intake was reduced by 31%, whereas** in the same time period, cat admissions increased by 7% for the rest of the shelter. This saved RSPCA NSW approximately \$100,000 in sheltering costs (RSPCA NSW Report 2023). **In the city of Paramatta, it resulted in a 46% reduction** in intake of cats and kittens to the RSPCA Sydney shelter, a 41% reduction in cats arriving at the council pound, and **a 49% reduction in cat-related nuisance complaints to council.** In two small country towns (Weddin and Walgett), **cat-related nuisance complaints to council decreased by 66% and 91% respectively after 1 year.** This evidence demonstrates these programs have substantial and rapid impacts in reducing issues associated with roaming cats and unwanted litters of kittens. In contrast, **no published information documents these outcomes for cat-related calls to council and cat impoundments when mandated containment is implemented.** In fact, what is documented is **cat-related calls and impoundments increase over the short, medium (3 years) and long-term (20 years)** (City of Casey 2021, Yarra Ranges Council 2018).

**Recommendation-** Legislative changes enabling councils to introduce cat containment laws should not be pursued. Instead, government efforts should prioritize evidence-based, community-driven strategies that have demonstrated effectiveness in sustainably managing free-roaming cat populations. Investing in accessible and affordable desexing programs and community engagement strategies offers a more equitable and long-term solution. These approaches not only address the root causes of cat overpopulation but also foster public support and compliance, reducing the burden on councils while achieving positive outcomes for both communities and wildlife.

##### 5. *How can the "One Welfare" approach be operationalised in NSW cat management policies?*

The "One Welfare" approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of animal welfare, human wellbeing, and environmental health, making it an ideal framework for shaping cat management policies in NSW. This approach ensures that policies are humane, effective, and socially and environmentally sustainable by addressing the needs of animals, people, and ecosystems. For cat management in NSW to successfully reduce the number of free-roaming cats in urban and peri-urban areas, it is essential to adopt humane, evidence-based methods aligned with the "One Welfare" framework, which aims to optimize the wellbeing of humans, animals, and their environments.

The total cost of companion animal management in NSW for all LGAs is estimated to be approximately \$43m annually (CIE 2022). This covers only the costs to councils and

includes costs to pounds, AMOs and programs. There are very substantial additional costs to rehoming organisations (rescue groups) and animal welfare organisations because they manage approximately similar total numbers of cats each year (approximately 19,000 cats) compared to LGAs that operate their own pound (approximately 20,000 cats) (Chua 2023). Despite this significant investment, the management of cats has proven ineffective, as the issue of free-roaming cats in urban and peri-urban areas is persisting. Therefore, it is clear a different strategy is needed. Fortunately, there are now **compelling examples from multiple local government areas in NSW as well as examples from Victoria and Queensland** of what is highly effective – high intensity free desexing programs targeted and microtargeted to the most problematic locations coupled with an assistive approach to solving cat-related issues. NSW already has anti-nuisance and welfare laws which can be used when an assistive approach fails.

It is critically important that in parallel with high-intensity and targeted desexing programs that an assistive approach is implemented in resolving cat-related nuisance issues rather than continued use of enforcement methods. However, training for AMOs in cat management is limited, leaving many unprepared to address the complexities of cat-related problems. The National Animal Care and Control Association (NACCA 2024) in the USA provides an example of effective training, offering training from the start of the position, upskilling with a mix of animal control-specific qualifications, where AMOs need to sit an exam and pass at the end of their training to qualify, other training including mental health first aid, community-centered programming, animal behaviour and communication, to better prepare officers for their roles and ensure their success (NACCA 2024). **It is strongly recommended that the NSW government prioritises funding to develop and implement this training for animal management officers (AMOs) and other local government staff.**

To operationalize the "One Welfare" approach, cat management policies must prioritise humane population control, fact-based information and practical assistance to support people to change behaviour (McLeod 2017) and proactive community engagement. High-intensity desexing programs, combined with microchipping and vaccination campaigns, are critical for reducing free-roaming cat populations sustainably. These programs should be supported by availability of affordable veterinary services to alleviate financial and emotional burdens on disadvantaged cat owners and semi-owners. Helping people keep their pets helps to protect the mental health of veterinarians and their staff who are tasked with euthanising pets with treatable illnesses and injuries.

In addition, encouraging greater community participation in resolving cat-related issues is important. Policies must include strategies to address nuisance complaints through assistive approaches, such as door-knocking to identify residents who need help with undesexed and wandering cats, distributing flyers, and offering solutions like desexing, microchipping, cat enclosures, or deterrents like motion-activated water sprays. Enforcement should be a last resort, used only when assistive measures fail.

Additionally, the mental health and wellbeing of animal management officers, shelter staff, and veterinarians must be prioritized. Training programs should include community engagement skills and mental health support to reduce the stress associated with managing cat-related conflicts and euthanising healthy animals. By equipping officers with these skills and focusing on proactive, non-punitive measures, councils can create a more compassionate and effective cat management system. Implementing the "One Welfare" approach in NSW cat management policies ensures sustainable and equitable outcomes that benefit animals, people, and the environment. It **shifts the focus from punitive enforcement to humane, community-based solutions**, building trust and collaboration among stakeholders while effectively addressing the complexities of managing free-roaming cat populations.

6. *What funding structure would best support high intensity desexing programs?*

A sustainable and effective funding structure for high-intensity desexing programs should include a combination of government investment, public-private partnerships, and community contributions. This approach ensures financial stability while leveraging resources from various stakeholders committed to reducing free-roaming cat populations and associated issues. Initial significant investment will need to be provided by the State government over 5 years and then reevaluated. Funding should ideally be in partnership with local governments and welfare agencies, which may be in-kind support for community engagement and provision of desexing surgeries. If adequate funding is received and used strategically in a way that has shown to be effective, then overtime, costs to the state and local governments, welfare agencies and rescue groups will start to decline as declines in free roaming cats, cat impoundments and surrenders and cat-related calls are realised. However, **this is conditional on adequate funding initially being available to implement programs at the intensity required in sufficient locations**. It is critical that any funding is tied to provision of baseline data on cat-related calls and shelter and pound intake and euthanasia per 1000 residents in the target areas, and the impact of the funding on these variables is assessed annually and processes adjusted if expected improvements are not realised.

We have provided an example of costings for the program based on data from Queensland and Victoria. If the average cost for a male or female cat can be **negotiated to \$150/cat** including microchipping, **then the cost in the target suburbs would be approximately \$1.50 per resident per year**, with the microchips provided by the state government. This cost estimate assumes that desexing is **targeted to suburbs** with highest cat impoundments or cat-related calls to council and *also* microtargeted within those areas to locations most likely to result in cats being surrendered or impounded and kittens being surrendered. If it is targeted to the suburbs with highest cat impoundments, **but not also microtargeted** within the suburb, then the cost would be in the order of **\$4.50 per resident per year**. These costs do not include the administration costs for booking cats in for surgery, and where required, trapping and/or transporting cats for owners and semi-owners needing assistance (usually semi-owners with multiple cats and residents without a car), nor the costs of community liaison officers if animal management officers (AMOs) are not involved in providing community engagement. It also does not include marketing of the program to residents most in need of assistance, nor registration costs for cats.

It is recommended that **local governments and animal welfare organisations** be funded to start **pilot programs and they be expanded thereafter** in areas with greatest impoundments, cat-related calls and/or wildlife of conservation concern. These programs will be most effective when AMOs are fully engaged in assisting and the program is in collaboration with welfare agencies and/or rescue groups. Access to affordable veterinary services will be a limiting factor, in addition to budget limitations. For example, **in a suburb of 10,000 residents, yearly funding of \$15,000 for three to four years would be required for desexing costs, assuming microtargeting to “hot spots” and veterinary costs were limited to \$150 per cat, including chip implantation, with the chip provided by the state government.** To get a measurable decrease in cat intake, **100 cats would require to be desexed each year for 3 to 4 years and lesser numbers thereafter.**

Because in most areas it is not possible to get 100% desexing rates for female cats, and there is mobility in the housing market within a region, with a proportion of new tenants and homeowners arriving each year, cat management based on **desexing needs to be long-term, but the costs will decrease over time** if it has initially sufficient intensity.

To effectively address free-roaming cat populations and their impact on native wildlife, a range of targeted funding and partnership initiatives should be implemented. These strategies, including government grants, public-private partnerships, community-based funding, grant-matching schemes, and outcomes-based funding models, provide sustainable solutions that support high-intensity desexing programs while ensuring accountability and equitable access to resources. Each potential initiative is outlined below:

- **Government Grants and Subsidies:**  
Federal, state, and local governments should allocate dedicated funding streams to support high intensity desexing programs. These funds could be included within broader environmental protection or animal welfare budgets, recognizing the benefits of desexing programs in reducing the impact of free-roaming cats on native wildlife. State governments could provide direct grants to local councils and welfare agencies, ensuring equitable access to funding across urban, suburban, and rural areas.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:**  
Collaboration with private entities, including veterinary clinics, animal welfare organizations, rescue groups and corporate sponsors, can significantly enhance program reach and impact. Partnerships with veterinary practices can include subsidies for discounted desexing services, while corporations, such as pet food manufacturers or retailers, can provide financial or in-kind support through sponsorships.
- **Community-Based Funding:**  
Community contributions can play a critical role in funding desexing programs. Councils and animal welfare organizations can establish donation-based models, where residents contribute to desexing initiatives through voluntary payments or local fundraising efforts. This structure could be complemented by crowdfunding campaigns targeting specific regions with high free-roaming cat populations, or where there are species of conservation concern.
- **Grant Matching and Incentives:**  
Governments and private sponsors could implement grant-matching schemes,

where funding contributions from councils, welfare organisations or community groups are matched dollar-for-dollar. This model incentivises local stakeholders to invest in desexing programs and ensures collective responsibility for addressing free-roaming cat populations.

➤ **Outcomes-Based Funding Models:**

Establishing performance-based funding, where continued financial support depends on measurable outcomes such as reductions in cat-related calls to councils and numbers of cats and kittens impounded and surrendered and their outcomes (reclaimed, rehomed, transferred and euthanised) per 1000 residents in the target areas compared to non-target areas, can ensure accountability and program effectiveness. Funding agreements should include clear annual reporting requirements and key performance indicators.

**Recommendation-** The most effective way to sustain high-intensity desexing programs is through an integrated funding structure that combines state and local government investment, support from animal welfare organisations and the private sector as well as community contributions. This model not only ensures the financial viability of these initiatives but also fosters collaboration among stakeholders, driving long-term success in managing free-roaming cat populations. Investing substantially in Community Cat Programs, both financially and through human resources, accelerates the achievement of program objectives. For instance, a study in Ipswich, Queensland, demonstrated that sterilizing 308 cats at a cost of \$2/resident for desexing costs over 3.4 years led to a 60% decrease in cat intake and an 85% reduction in euthanasia rates by the third year, highlighting the rapid effectiveness of targeted sterilization programs (Rand 2024). **RSPCA NSW's** high intensity, free desexing program targeted to locations of high cat intake, after just one-year, **reduced cat intake by 31%, whereas** in the same time period, cat intake increased by **7% for the rest of the shelter**. This saved RSPCA NSW approximately \$100,000. Similarly, Nashville's Community Cat Program, supported by a \$100,000 city investment, significantly reduced stray cat intake and euthanasia rates, underscoring the impact of dedicated funding and resources ([Better Cities for Pets](#)). **These examples illustrate that robust initial investments in Community Cat Programs can lead to swift and sustainable improvements in managing community cat populations.**

7. *How do you propose addressing concerns about the long-term sustainability of free desexing initiatives?*

To ensure the long-term sustainability of free desexing initiatives, a multi-faceted approach is essential, combining government support, strategic partnerships, community engagement, and robust evaluation mechanisms. Free desexing programs are vital for reducing free-roaming cat populations and associated issues, but their longevity depends on reliable funding, community buy-in, and ongoing monitoring of effectiveness. However, **they are the only strategy show to be effective in reducing complaints and the numbers of cats impounded and euthanised at a suburb and city level.** Free-roaming cats are a community problem and need holistic solutions that are effective and based on the One Welfare philosophy.



For these programs to be effective it is critical that the key factors in making them successful are implemented – high intensity and targeted to areas of high impoundments, shelter intake and/or cat related complaints, and microtargeted to the locations that are most in need of assistance. These programs should establish clear, measurable objectives over a 3–5 year period, concentrating efforts on areas with high complaint and intake rates. Utilizing microtargeting strategies allows for the efficient allocation of resources to locations where cats are most at risk of entering a pound or shelter. The intensity of these efforts is crucial; broader targeting may require desexing 30 cats per 1,000 residents annually, while microtargeted approaches might focus on 10 cats per 1,000 residents each year. **Funding for the desexing programs must be in parallel with a commitment from LGAs to transition from an enforcement approach to an assistive approach for solving cat-related nuisance issues.**

**Stable funding streams** are critical to sustaining these initiatives. State and local governments should allocate ongoing resources for desexing programs within animal management and environmental budgets, acknowledging their role in protecting native wildlife and reducing cat-related complaints. Partnerships with veterinary clinics, corporate sponsors, and animal welfare organizations can supplement government funding. Provision of state government funding from gambling or smoking tax revenue could be considered. Alternatively at the local government level, a small levy on property rates could be considered, given free-roaming cats are a community wide issue that needs solving. For example, if an environmental and social amenity levy of \$2.50 was added to the annual rates for the approximately 3,365,000 dwellings in NSW, it would raise \$8.4 million. Although a needs analysis needs to be conducted to obtain more accurate assessment of costs, if it is assumed that one third of NSW's population (8.1 million) would be in suburbs that need to be targeted (2.63 million residents) and desexing costs could be negotiated for an average of \$150 for a male or female cat, then the cost would be approximately \$5.3 million.

This approach would leave some funding from the rates' levy for assistance with containment fencing in areas where threatened and endangered species reside that are susceptible to cat predation, as well as costs for promotion of the program, and costs for development and dissemination of science-based practical information to facilitate behaviour change for increasing containment and early desexing by 4 months of age. This assumes in-kind funding from LGAs and animal welfare agencies for administration costs, community engagement and marketing. Additional one-off funding would likely be required to build capacity for high volume desexing clinics and community veterinary services. Funding should also be considered to facilitate training of new veterinary graduates in high-volume desexing methods, for example, at the new veterinary school at the Lismore campus of the University of Southern Cross.

Programs must also **target areas with high densities** of free-roaming cats and low socioeconomic communities, where the need is greatest, to maximize impact. By concentrating resources in these hotspots, programs can achieve measurable reductions in stray populations, enhancing cost-effectiveness. Pairing desexing with additional services like microchipping, vaccination, and community information to facilitate behaviour change, for example, desexing by 4 months and cat containment,

ensures a comprehensive approach that addresses multiple aspects of cat population management.

**Community engagement** is fundamental to sustaining free desexing initiatives. Encouraging semi-owners and residents feeding stray cats to take full responsibility for the animals they care for is a key strategy. Offering free or affordable services removes financial barriers, while awareness campaigns highlight the benefits of desexing for both cats and communities, and the negative impact on animal welfare and human mental health of kittens being born to die. Partnerships with local councils and community groups strengthen the reach and effectiveness of these programs, fostering a sense of shared responsibility. **Financial barriers such as cat registration, permits for desexing later than 4 months of age, and excess cat permits if not breeding for sale, should all be removed.** The effectiveness of microchipping for reuniting cats with owners should be increased with SMS and email messaging every 3 to 6 months to remind people to update contact details. Semi-owned cats should be microchipped to an organization (e.g. cats in multi-cat situations (colonies) or to a business (e.g. farm or barn cats). Animal welfare agencies or rescue groups helping manage multi-cat sites should be registered on the chip as a secondary contact and in their internal database should have details of the cat's location and carers. This is the successful model being used in the Australian Community Cat Program in Ipswich. To protect the welfare of cats, those cats that remain semi-owned cats (all at multi-cat sites) are also microchipped and secondary contact details are recorded (in this case, the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation), so a responsible person can be contacted by a veterinarian, shelter or rescue group to make decisions for the best welfare outcome for the cat in a timely manner, particularly if the cat is injured or sick.

**Regular evaluation and adaptive management** are essential to maintaining the effectiveness of these initiatives. Data on desexing rates per 1000 residents and declines in complaints or impoundments should be collected and analyzed to guide program adjustments. However, many councils do not impound domestic cats or record cat-related complaints, reflecting a gap in addressing these issues. If funding were provided, ideally 5-to-10-year camera trap data should also be collected to document the reduction in free-roaming cat populations over time. **Transparent reporting of outcomes** builds public trust and stakeholder confidence, ensuring continued support. Over time with these programs, reliance on state government funding will be reduced, as decreases in free-roaming cat numbers occur which are reflected by decreased cat-related calls and cat impoundments. This gradual shift should be accompanied by continuing targeted support for households in need.

By integrating these strategies, free desexing initiatives can remain sustainable and effective in reducing free-roaming cat populations, protecting wildlife, and fostering healthier communities

## Response to the Office of Local Government Recommendations

1. *The NSW Government commit to an ongoing, state-wide community awareness and education campaign on responsible pet ownership, the importance of desexing, and the benefits of keeping cats contained.*

While a state-wide campaign on awareness and education about pet ownership, desexing and cat containment is well-intentioned, its success depends on addressing systemic barriers alongside provision of targeted practical information. Focusing solely on "responsible pet ownership" risks alienating those who face challenges like the cost of desexing, limited access to veterinary care, and rental restrictions that make containment difficult or impossible. Instead of emphasizing individual responsibility, the campaign should shift toward providing practical support and accessible solutions. Research data that is being collected as part of the Australian Community Cat Program shows that people want to be responsible, and it is not lack of knowledge, but lack of resources and barriers such as cost (Dutton-Regester 2024).

It is important to note that of owned cats in NSW, **contemporary data shows that 65% of cat owners contain their cats 24/7 and another 28% do at night** (Ma 2023).

Therefore, 93% of cats are contained at least some of the time, with only 7% not contained at least at night, which is when species of conservation concern susceptible to cat predation in urban and peri-urban areas are active and when most problematic nuisance behaviours occur. This further highlights the issue of free-roaming cats is not predominantly due to owned cats and that spending large amounts of money on awareness and education campaigns is unlikely to result in measurable decreases in cat-related complaints or impoundments. In contrast, the RSPCA's Keeping Cats Safe at Home has provided compelling results of the effectiveness of this approach.

To enhance effectiveness, retraining council officers to prioritize community outreach over enforcement is essential. These officers can play a pivotal role in building trust by connecting communities with resources such as subsidized desexing programs, accessible veterinary services, and tailored education initiatives. This proactive approach not only helps reduce barriers to compliance but also fosters collaboration between councils and residents.

By focusing on practical assistance and empowering council officers to engage with communities constructively, the campaign can create meaningful change. Combining education with support-driven outreach ensures the message resonates with diverse populations and results in tangible benefits for pets, their owners, and local governments.

2. *The NSW Government increase capital and operational funding to enable upgrading of pound facilities, provision of support services to facilitate rehoming and to assist with educating the community about responsible pet ownership.*

While the intention to increase funding for upgrading pound facilities and supporting rehoming efforts appears positive, this approach focuses on reactive measures rather than addressing the root causes of pet overpopulation and surrender. Allocating

substantial resources to pound facilities risks perpetuating the current system without reducing intake rates or improving long-term outcomes for animals. Upgrades to facilities alone will not solve the underlying issues of stray and unowned animals, which are primarily driven by economic and social barriers to pet ownership, such as access to affordable desexing and veterinary care. If the example of Blacktown Animal Rehoming Centre (BARC), the impressive new shelter at **Blacktown City is examined, \$36 million were spent** on the facility (Power 2023) but within a short time it was at capacity and at times is over capacity with two dogs in pens designed for one dog. It is critical that funding is focused on reducing intake, not building bigger shelters. Sub-standard housing needs to be upgraded, but that does not necessarily need a whole pound rebuild, which will have low return on investment regarding resolution of free-roaming cat issues.

Furthermore, while community education on "responsible pet ownership" has merit, this terminology can unintentionally alienate those facing systemic challenges, such as low-income households or renters unable to comply with containment or registration requirements due to financial or logistical constraints. Instead, efforts should focus on accessible, community-based programs that directly address these barriers—such as free or affordable desexing clinics, accessible microchipping services, and support for fostering or adopting animals.

Redirecting funding toward proactive and preventative measures, such as community engagement, support programs, and outreach, would achieve more sustainable outcomes than upgrading pound facilities. A shift in focus is necessary to truly reduce the numbers of animals entering pounds and improve welfare outcomes for both pets and their owners.

3. *Amend the Companion Animals Act 1998 to:*

a) *define when a cat is considered to be owned, or what cat ownership entails;*

Cat ownership is defined as an individual assuming responsibility for a cat's care. This includes providing essential needs such as food, shelter, medical attention, and ensuring the cat is microchipped and registered.

The following definitions are adapted from the RSPCA's Best Practice Domestic Cat Management (2018):

- **Domestic cats** have some dependence on people (direct or indirect) and live in the vicinity of where people live or frequent, which includes around farm buildings, mining sites and in indigenous communities, and are subcategorised as owned, semi-owned and unowned. **Domestic cats may be:**
  - **owned**, live in a domestic household, are usually named, have a form of identification, and depend on humans for their food.

- **semi-owned**, are directly dependent on humans and are intentionally fed by people who do not consider they own them. These cats are more abundant in disadvantaged areas and where food resources are available. They are sometimes called stray cats. Recent research documented strong emotional bonds of semi-owners with the cats they care for, and almost identical to the bonds reported by cat owners with their pet cats (Scotney 2023; Neal 2023; Ma 2023; Crawford 2023). These cats are also frequently named.
- **unowned**, are indirectly dependent on humans and receive food from people unintentionally, such as via food waste bins. They are more abundant in areas where food resources are available. These cats are of varying sociability and are sometimes called stray cats. They are infrequent in urban areas because someone will generally start to feed them, transitioning them to being semi-owned cats.
- **Feral cats** have no relationship with or dependence on humans (neither direct nor indirect), survive by hunting or scavenging for food, and live and reproduce in the wild (e.g., forests, woodlands, grasslands, deserts). Feral cats do not live in the vicinity of where people live, and they do not receive food from humans intentionally (direct feeding) or unintentionally (e.g. via food waste bins, rubbish dumps). Feral cats are not found or trapped in the vicinity of where people live or frequent and are **not the subject of nuisance complaints relating to behaviour around humans**.

### **Recommendation:**

- Adopt a clear and standardized definition of cat ownership in legislation to ensure consistency across jurisdictions. This definition should emphasize the responsibilities of care, microchipping, and registration, making it easier to identify and manage owned versus unowned cats, and to enforce related regulations effectively.
- Adopt clear definitions of domestic and feral cats based on RSPCA recommendations (RSPCA 2018).

#### *b) clarify the application of section 32 (powers for seizing a cat)*

The intention of the application of section 32 (powers for seizing a cat) legislation is to establish a legal framework that balances the protection of people, animals, and wildlife with humane and ethical treatment of cats. The key objectives include:

**Safety:** Empowering individuals and authorized officers to take appropriate action when a cat's welfare is compromised, while promoting collaboration with owners, carers, rescue groups, and animal welfare organizations to seek advice and assistance in cat welfare concerns.

**Livestock Protection:** While cats are not typically considered a major threat to livestock, there are some circumstances where they can impact livestock health and welfare. Cats, particularly those living around farm buildings, may pose a risk by spreading diseases such as toxoplasmosis, which can lead to reproductive losses in sheep and goats, as well as neurological or congenital issues in newborn livestock. Additionally, in rare cases, cats may prey on small poultry, particularly chicks or young birds. To mitigate these risks, livestock protection strategies should include managing cat populations around farms through biosecurity practices to prevent kitten births and thereby reduce risk of disease transmission, because cats under one year of age are most likely to shed toxoplasma oocysts (Dubey 1997; 1995). Funding from federal and state government in collaboration with livestock and animal welfare organizations should be used to facilitate desexing and responsible cat management. Ensuring proper waste management, secure poultry enclosures, fencing around sensitive areas and protecting stored animal feed from being contaminated by dead rodents and cat faeces also help protect livestock from potential infections or interactions with cats. Many farmers value cats as working animals for rodent control, and farmer's mental health and wellbeing is negatively impacted when forced to use lethal methods for population control (unpublished Crawford 2024 a,b). However, from an animal and human welfare perspective, as well as for environmental safety, farm cat populations need to be controlled by desexing.

It is important to recognize that cats in indigenous communities, around farm buildings, mining sites and other more remote areas where there are humans, should be classed as domestic cats. Effective management can only be achieved when the value to humans either through companionship and/or as working cats, is considered. For example, in a current study being conducted by APWF of free desexing offered for cats on dairy farms, all farmers stated that cats are considered important working animals because they effectively eliminate costs associated with damage caused by rodents, particularly to dairy wiring, and they reduce food safety issues associated with rodents (unpublished Crawford 2024 a, b).

Farmers stated that cats are the preferred method of rodent control and were preferred over rodent poison because of factors such as cost, baiting's impact on wildlife, and its threat to pets and children. Of note, they mentioned that baits are tax deductible but currently cats are not. All farmers viewed the cats as working animals and stated they are a necessity on the farm, with one farmer stating his cats did more work than his working dogs (which are tax deductible). Following desexing of the cats, farmers perceived an improvement in the cats' impact on wildlife with comments stating that they see less (if any) wildlife being killed by the cats after desexing. Following desexing they also noted an improvement in the cats' health and behaviour with improved body condition, less fighting, more friendly behaviour and less roaming. Most farmers have some sort of bond with some of the cats and these cats have names, they talk to them, they pet them (unpublished Crawford 2024a, b).

**Wildlife Conservation:** A collaborative and proactive approach to wildlife conservation and cat management ensures both the protection of native species and the humane treatment of cats. By establishing designated wildlife areas with appropriate fencing

and management strategies, native animals can be safeguarded from predation while minimizing harm to cats. This approach encourages cooperation between conservation groups, local councils, rescue organizations, and the broader community to implement humane solutions such as desexing, relocation, and responsible management. Through education, community engagement, and targeted intervention, it is possible to balance wildlife protection with ethical and sustainable cat management practices.

For effective protection of threatened and endangered species, it is essential to compile citizen science data and existing databases, supplemented by camera trap data for confirmation, to develop detailed maps identifying key native species at the street and property level. Targeted protection strategies can then be implemented. For example, based on documented causes of mortality for an individual species (NSW Government), possible actions include assisting cat owners with containment enclosures, providing information through mailbox flyers, SMS messaging and doorknocking to encourage dogs and cats to be kept inside at night, providing appropriate plants for resident's gardens and consideration of reduced speeds for motor vehicles. **Protection of threatened and endangered species is a community responsibility, and it should not be expected that individuals fund this cost.**

**Accountability:** Requiring individuals who take action against a cat to ensure the animal receives appropriate care and to report incidents to promote transparency and accountability.

**Humane Treatment:** Emphasizing the humane treatment of cats in all actions, aligning with existing animal welfare laws.

While the intent of this legislation is to create a balanced approach, it falls short of achieving its objectives due to critical gaps in implementation and oversight. In New South Wales, several concerns have been identified regarding the management of cat populations by local councils.

Firstly, there is an issue with inadequate recording of cat-related complaints. Many such complaints are not documented in customer service management systems, leading to a lack of accountability and transparency in addressing these issues. Current procedures for seizing and handling cats are also limited. Officers are permitted to intervene only when a cat poses a direct threat, leaving nuisance complaints unresolved. This situation places undue responsibility on community members to trap and transport cats to shelters, pounds or veterinary clinics. Shelters and veterinary clinics may not receive funding for accepting cats for local governments. Local Government Authorities (LGAs) play a crucial role in addressing cat overpopulation in NSW by implementing proactive and assistive programs in collaboration with rescue groups. These community members and groups are carrying a substantial burden, often relying on limited resources to manage stray cats through rescue, desexing, and rehoming efforts. By providing funding, policy support, and community education, LGAs can help ease this strain, ensuring a more effective and sustainable approach to managing cat populations while improving animal welfare outcomes.

There is a need to promote humane and ethical practices in cat management. Legislation should emphasize humane treatment not only in wording but also in execution, ensuring that all actions prioritize the welfare of cats. Additionally, improved community support is essential. Relying on community members to resolve cat-related complaints without adequate guidance or support can lead to inhumane practices and poor outcomes.

Lastly, while protecting wildlife and livestock from cats is important, measures taken should be scientifically justified and aligned with broader conservation goals to ensure effectiveness and ethical standards. The value farmers place on working cats around farm buildings and machinery to control rodent damage needs to be recognised and cat populations controlled in a way that benefits animal and human welfare as well as the environment Crawford 2024 a, b). Addressing these concerns requires a comprehensive approach that includes better documentation practices, revised intervention procedures, emphasis on humane treatment, enhanced community support, and scientifically grounded measures for wildlife protection.

### **Recommendations:**

- To achieve the goals of safety, accountability, and humane treatment, the legislation **must address current gaps** in complaint tracking, community support, and humane handling processes. These measures will ensure a balanced and ethical approach to cat management, protecting people, animals, and wildlife while fostering accountability and compassion within the community.
- **Introduce mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating** the effectiveness of actions taken under the legislation, ensuring they contribute to the intended conservation protection outcomes.
- **Provide resources and support to the community for resolving cat related complaint.** Mediation and practical solutions need to be provided, with enforcement of anti-nuisance laws and trapping offending cats only used when an assistive approach fails.
- **Require mandatory training for council officers** in community engagement for solving cat-related issues and in science-based cat behaviour, along with development of practical guides clearly outlining expectations for community members relating to nuisance cats. Training programs for animal management officers should be developed based on the National Animal Care and Control Association (NACCA 2024) in the USA
- **Establish clear processes** for scanning microchips and reuniting cats with their owners to minimize the burden on the community and ensure proper handling.
- **Implement standardized processes** requiring councils to log and track all cat-related complaints and their outcomes, ensuring accountability and enabling data-driven decision-making.



c) *define cats as domestic, infant or feral.*

Appropriate and evidence-based definitions of cats is foundational to ensure the management of cats is focused appropriately. It is imperative that these definitions be revised in NSW legislation to ensure effective policy responses and management approaches which can be delivered efficiently. The following definitions are adapted from the RSPCA's Best Practice Domestic Cat Management (2018):

- **Domestic cats** have some dependence on people (direct or indirect) and live in the vicinity of where people live or frequent, which includes around farm buildings, mining sites and in indigenous communities, and are subcategorised as owned, semi-owned and unowned. **Domestic cats may be:**
  - **owned**, live in a domestic household, are usually named, have a form of identification, and depend on humans for their food.
  - **semi-owned**, are directly dependent on humans and are intentionally fed by people who do not consider they own them. These cats are more abundant in disadvantaged areas and where food resources are available. They are sometimes called stray cats. Recent research documented strong emotional bonds of semi-owners with the cats they care for, and almost identical to the bonds reported by cat owners with their pet cats (Scotney 2023; Neal 2023; Ma 2023; Crawford 2023). These cats are also frequently named.
  - **unowned**, are indirectly dependent on humans and receive food from people unintentionally, such as via food waste bins. They are more abundant in areas where food resources are available. These cats are of varying sociability and are sometimes called stray cats. Unowned cats are relatively rare in urban areas because where there are cats, a compassionate person will usually provide food, and unowned cats exist more often at places like rubbish tips.
- **Feral cats** have no relationship with or dependence on humans (neither direct nor indirect), survive by hunting or scavenging for food, and live and reproduce in the wild (e.g., forests, woodlands, grasslands, deserts). Feral cats do not live in the vicinity of where people live, and they do not receive food from humans intentionally (direct feeding) or unintentionally (e.g. via food waste bins, rubbish dumps). Feral cats are not found or trapped in the vicinity of where people live or frequent and are **not the subject of nuisance complaints relating to behaviour around humans.**

**Misclassifying domestic cats, including semi-owned cats, as feral cats creates barriers to effective management** and resolution of the issue of free-roaming cats in urban and peri-urban areas. To allow for successful, community-based management strategies, domestic cats should be excluded from the legal definition of feral cats. This distinction would enable targeted programs that humanely and

scientifically reduce the number of urban free-roaming cats over time, and reduce the negative psychological impact on shelter and pound staff as well as community members who support and care for them when inhumane, and ineffective methods are used to manage these cats.

Importantly, **behaviour towards humans is an invalid test of whether a cat is feral or domestic**. Despite this, many local governments and some shelters misclassify cats as feral based on behaviour in the trap cage or shortly after admission and euthanise them immediately or within the first 24 hours. **Cats trapped as a result of a complaint about nuisance behaviours are, by definition, domestic cats** because a complaint implies the cat is living around where humans live or frequent. Sociability and adoptability cannot be judged in a highly stressful environment, such as in a trap cage; frightened pet cats may display more aggressive behaviours towards humans than truly feral cats (Slater 2013; Jacobson 2022). A minimum of 3 to 5 days, and up to 14 days and longer, are required for many pet cats to habituate to a new environment and for accurate assessment of sociability,

*d) enable councils to introduce enforceable cat containment or curfew policies in their local government areas.*

There is a belief that free-roaming cats are mainly the result of irresponsible cat owners, and therefore the issue needs to be managed by legislation and its enforcement. However, for enforcement to be effective, there must be an identifiable owner, and the reality is that most free-roaming cats in urban areas are unidentified owned or semi-owned cats in low socioeconomic areas where the costs of registration, microchipping and cat-proof fencing are often too prohibitive for cat owners and semi-owners to comply with. A study conducted with 4482 people across NSW, **65% indicated they keep their cats currently contained to their property and a further 28% are contained at night** (Ma 2023). Therefore, 93% of people are containing their cat at night which is when most species of conservation concern are active, and the majority of the problematic cat behaviours occur.

**Mandating containment is not effective** in increasing cat containment of those cats not currently contained. It also leads to unrealistic expectations in the community that they will not see a wandering cat, resulting in increased cat-related complaints. When implemented, **mandated containment increases cat-related complaints, cat impoundments, cat euthanasia, and costs to local governments and shelters** [Yarra Ranges, Hobsons Bay, Casey Council]

The numbers of free-roaming cats are greatest in low socioeconomic areas. Incomes in these areas are below the Australian average, a larger proportion of residents live in rental accommodation and a higher proportion of households have rent repayments greater than 30% of household income (Rand 2024a; b; Dutton-Regester 2024, Cotterell 2024). **Cat containment systems often cost between \$700 and \$2000** or higher, making it highly unlikely a low-income

household can afford one if it is needed. For example, in a suburb with a cat intake into the local shelters of in excess of 20 cats/1000 residents (average for Queensland is 7 cats/1000 residents), individual median weekly income was approximately A\$636/week (Rand 2024b). Because of lack of affordability, mandated containment is a barrier to semi-owners taking ownership of a domestic cat and effectively makes cat ownership illegal for many low-income owners, perpetuating the “it’s not my cat” response.

**Cat containment should be encouraged and facilitated but not mandated.**

Owners can be messaged to **provide their cats with a last “bed-time” meal indoors (APWF)**. At little or no cost to the owner, this method trains the cat to come inside at night when the door out-side can then be closed. Night-time containment is effective in protecting wildlife of conservation concern susceptible to cat predation because most are nocturnal in urban areas of Australia (NSW Govt 2023). Other options where species of conservation concern are located include assisting cat owners with the construction or costs of cat-proof fencing or enclosures. Electronic fencing (hidden fencing) may be less expensive for some properties. It is not subject to restrictions for modifying rental properties, and key components can be relocated to another property. It can also be used around doors or windows to stop “door dasher” cats escaping. If used correctly, electronic fencing is not associated with welfare issues [Kasbaoui 2016].

The APWF strongly opposes councils introducing enforceable cat containment or curfew policies in their local government areas in NSW; for the following reasons listed:

- **Lack of Evidence for Effectiveness:**
  - No scientific evidence supports mandated cat containment laws as a successful model for reducing wandering cats or associated issues such as nuisance complaints or wildlife predation.
  - Local and international data demonstrate that these laws fail in both the short and long term to reduce the free-roaming cat population and complaints.
- **Ineffectiveness in Addressing the Core Issue:**
  - The majority of free-roaming cats are unowned or semi-owned, making containment laws unenforceable and impractical.
  - Most impounded cats are not traceable to an owner, preventing enforcement of penalties and leading to increased euthanasia rates.
  - In NSW 65% of cat owners state they already contain their cats to their property and a further 28% of cats are contained at night (Ma 2023). Therefore, 93% of people are containing their cat at night which is when

most species of conservation concern are active, and the majority of the problematic cat behaviours occur (Ma 2023).

- **Increased Costs and Burden on Local Governments:**
  - Mandated containment leads to higher costs for trapping, impoundment, and euthanasia, averaging \$500 per cat.
  - Enforcement requires significant resources, including staff time and equipment, with trapping taking weeks per cat.
- **Negative Consequences:**
  - **Increased euthanasia:** Cat containment and curfews laws result in higher impoundments and owner surrenders, leading to an increase in euthanasia of healthy cats and kittens. This not only affects animal welfare but also has significant emotional and mental health impacts on shelter staff including veterinarians, and the broader community.
  - **Higher nuisance complaints:** Unrealistic community expectations lead to more complaints, trapping, and impoundments.
  - **Reduced cat adoptions:** Containment laws discourage adoption and semi-owner involvement, increasing the roaming cat population.
  - **Social justice concerns:** Low-income households and renters face financial and practical barriers to compliance, disproportionately criminalizing vulnerable populations.
- **Impact on Public Welfare:**
  - The laws increase stress and mental health risks for staff involved in euthanizing animals.
  - Some contained cats may experience welfare issues such as obesity, behavioral problems, and urinary tract diseases.

### **Recommendation:**

- **Alternative Solutions:**
  - Community Cat Programs, involving free desexing and microchipping in high-complaint areas, are proven to reduce unwanted litters and roaming cat populations effectively.
  - Encouraging semi-owners to take full ownership through support programs addresses the core issue without the negative consequences of mandated containment.

- By investing in proactive measures such as containment fencing in areas where species of conservation concern are present, governments can achieve dual benefits—enhancing conservation efforts while promoting social equity. To effectively protect threatened species, it is essential to compile citizen science data and existing databases, supplemented by camera trap data for confirmation, to develop detailed maps identifying key native species at the street and property level. Targeted protection strategies can then be implemented, including support for cat owners with containment enclosures, community education through mail drops, SMS messaging, and door-knocking campaigns to encourage containing dogs and cats at night, as well as initiatives such as providing native plants for residential gardens and considering reduced speed limits in areas where vehicle strikes are a known threat. Protecting threatened and endangered species is a shared community responsibility, and the financial burden should not fall solely on individuals.

Governments should focus on evidence-based strategies like Community Cat Programs, which effectively reduce wandering cats and associated issues while supporting animal welfare and minimizing enforcement costs and community burdens. Mandated 24/7 cat containment laws should not be implemented due to their proven ineffectiveness and significant negative consequences.

- e) *Add an opt-in provision for councils to issue orders and fines for individuals who repeatedly fail to identify and register kittens or for incidences of animal hoarding.*

It is important to understand the definitions and differences between **animal hoarding**, **multi-cat households**, and **illegal companion animal businesses** to ensure effective management strategies and appropriate interventions. Each presents unique challenges that require tailored approaches.

#### **Definitions (See Hill 2019):**

- **Exploitive Hoarding:**
  - Involves the intentional accumulation of a large number of animals, beyond the individual's capacity to provide adequate care.
  - Often associated with underlying mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, or trauma triggered by significant life events.
  - Hoarding cases typically require long-term engagement with social services and animal management to monitor and maintain agreed animal numbers. Enforcement actions, such as fines or removal orders, are

rarely effective due to the high likelihood (99%) of reoffending without behaviour change interventions.

- **Overwhelmed Carers:**

- Overwhelmed cat carers are individuals who struggle to manage the number of cats in their care, often due to a lack of resources, but do not actively seek more cats and are open to assistance, provided the cats are not euthanized. This differs from rescue hoarders, who actively acquire more cats and require more time to build trust, and exploitative hoarders, who may neglect the animals' welfare despite intervention efforts.

- **Multi-Cat Households:**

- Households where multiple cats are kept responsibly, with proper care provided for their physical and emotional needs.
- Multi-cat households are not inherently problematic unless care standards are compromised, leading to issues of overcrowding, neglect, or health concerns.
- These cases may require support to prevent unintentional breeding through desexing and microchipping programs, but they differ significantly from hoarding.
- They do not actively seek to acquire cats, and cannot afford the requirements of legislation requirements, such as registration.

- **Illegal Companion Animal Businesses:**

- Unauthorized intentional breeding or sale of animals, often for commercial purposes, without proper registration or compliance with legal standards.
- Characterized by repeated failure to identify and register kittens or dogs, inadequate care, and lack of adherence to animal welfare laws.
- These cases require thorough investigation and prosecution under applicable laws to prevent continued illegal activity and ensure animal welfare.

### **Key Considerations:**

- **Exploitive Hoarding Challenges:** Resolving animal hoarding requires a multi-agency approach involving collaboration with social services, mental health professionals, and AMOs. The resources and costs associated with these cases are substantial and unlikely to be recovered through legal processes. Working with animal hoarding cases is a long process, with no quick fix, and very little support for the mental health of the individual or officers whilst resolving the

issues associated. This type of complaint can take years to resolve and years of follow-up to ensure they do not increase numbers in the future. If not handled with the appropriate training, skill and negotiations, there is a 99% chance the offender will reoffend. As stated, the costs are substantial for these properties, but not just limited to costs associated with housing and care of animals, but property clean up costs that will never be recovered.

- **Support for Overwhelmed Carers/ Multi-Cat Households:** Some multi-cat households are well-managed but may benefit from community assistance programs to prevent overpopulation through desexing and education initiatives. In low socioeconomic areas the carers are often overwhelmed but welcome assistance provided the cats are not killed.
- **Addressing Illegal Businesses:** Illegal companion animal businesses must be identified and prosecuted to the full extent of the law, as they exploit animals for purely financial gain, with little to no regard for their welfare. These operations undermine the efforts of responsible breeders, disregard animal welfare standards, and negatively impact responsible pet ownership. Effective enforcement and strict penalties are essential to deter such businesses and protect the welfare of companion animals.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Develop Clear Guidelines and Processes:** Establish clear protocols for identifying and differentiating hoarding types (rescue hoarders and exploitive hoarders) from multi-cat households and overwhelmed carers, and illegal businesses to ensure appropriate and proportionate responses.
- **Enhance Collaboration:** Foster partnerships between AMOs, welfare organizations, and social services to address hoarding cases comprehensively.
- **Support Responsible Ownership:** Provide resources, such as subsidized desexing programs, to assist multi-cat households in maintaining animal welfare standards.
- **Enforce Compliance for Illegal Businesses:** Strengthen enforcement mechanisms to investigate and prosecute illegal intentional breeding for commercial gain operations effectively.
- **Promote Community Education:** Increase awareness about the differences between these situations to reduce stigma and encourage community engagement in animal welfare. The primary role of AMOs in ensuring community safety and enforcing domestic animal legislation has contributed to a negative public perception of their presence. AMOs are often associated with complaint responses and enforcement rather than as a source of support for cat caregivers, their animals, and concerned community members. This challenge is particularly evident in low socioeconomic areas, where there is a broader

distrust of authority. As a result, AMOs are frequently perceived as enforcers issuing fines rather than facilitators of animal welfare and compliance support.

By understanding and addressing these distinct issues appropriately, the government can create effective policies that protect animal welfare and support community wellbeing (unpublished Cotterell 2025).

4. *Subsidise desexing programs for cats state-wide, but particularly for owners in financial hardship or where there are significant numbers of semi-owned / 'homeless' cats.*

Implementing innovative desexing programs is essential to effectively manage cat populations and reduce impoundments and euthanasia rates. Expanding targeted initiatives, such as the successful model employed by Banyule City Council and in the city of Ipswich, Queensland and the RSPCA NSW program with 11 councils, can significantly mitigate these issues. These programs should establish clear, measurable objectives over a 3–5 year period, concentrating efforts on areas with high complaint and intake rates. Utilizing microtargeting strategies allows for the efficient allocation of resources to locations where cats are most at risk. The intensity of these efforts is crucial; broader targeting may require desexing 30 cats per 1,000 residents annually, while microtargeted approaches might focus on 10 cats per 1,000 residents each year.

Ensuring accessibility and equity for disadvantaged residents within these programs is vital. Eliminating barriers, such as the necessity for government-issued cards to access services, is important because many individuals in disadvantaged areas may not qualify for such documentation yet still cannot afford desexing procedures. Providing affordable or free desexing services is particularly essential in low-income and regional areas where veterinary access is limited.

Support for regional high-volume desexing efforts is also necessary because these areas are on average lower income and have cost and accessible barriers. Prioritizing high-volume desexing clinics and mobile veterinary services can ensure coverage in underserved areas, including farming communities. Allocating council resources for transporting cats to desexing clinics is a more effective use of AMO time compared to transporting cats for euthanasia.

Current management practices, such as trap–adopt/kill methods, often lead to the unnecessary euthanasia of healthy cats, imposing psychological and emotional burdens on AMOs, shelter staff, and carers. Data indicates that only about 3%-7% of cats entering pounds or shelters are reclaimed, with approximately 33% euthanized in the 2018–2019 period, highlighting the inefficiencies and emotional toll of existing approaches.

These practices contribute to compassion fatigue and mental health challenges among those involved in euthanizing healthy cats and managing cat overpopulation. To alleviate these issues of negative human mental health impacts, it is recommended to



remove legislative barriers to sterilization of cats being cared for by semi-owners and allow Return to Field (RTF), particularly in areas without wildlife conservation concerns. Sterilization and microchipping of returned to field and semi-owned cats without requiring formal ownership should be legalised, and on the microchip database the secondary contact and phone numbers are listed for an organisation (welfare or rescue group) or business (for farm and factory cats). The current legislative framework oversimplifies cat management by assuming that free-roaming cats result primarily from irresponsible ownership.

Return to field (RTF) is where stray cats that are brought to the shelter by the public or impounded by AMOs are desexed and returned to where they were found, if they are deemed healthy, but not readily adoptable because of behaviour. Returning cats that are unlikely to be adopted to their home location (called return to field) is based on the premise that if the cat is healthy, it will have a carer in the vicinity of where it was found (HSUS 2024). It is more likely to be reunited with its owner or carer by returning it to where it was found, rather than by holding it in the shelter, where return to owner rates are low (HSUS 2024). Cats are 13 times more likely to be reunited with the owner by means other than a visit to the shelter by the owner (Logan 2024). Return to field (RTF) is very important in minimizing exposure of staff to the negative mental health effects of caring for a cat to socialise it, and then sometime later, a decision made that it is not adoptable within an agreed timeframe and must be euthanised. Anecdotally, return to field is being embraced by shelter staff because it avoids the mental trauma of having to euthanise healthy less socialised cats, and improves job satisfaction (ICC 2024). This is being evaluated as part of an investigation of the effect of the Australian Community Cat Program at the city of Ipswich based on desexing of owned, semi-owned and unowned cats under the research permit issued by the Qld Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (Rand 2024).

Adopting evidence-based solutions is crucial. Legislation should accurately reflect the underlying causes of free-roaming cat populations and support proven interventions, such as microtargeted desexing programs and community engagement initiatives. Public messaging should avoid demonizing cats, as this can lead to ineffective measures like mandated containment and cat limits as well as cruelty. Instead, the focus should be on providing practical and targeted information and collaboration to develop humane and effective cat management strategies.

### **Recommendations:**

- To **effectively address cat overpopulation** and its associated challenges, the APWF recommends a multifaceted approach. This includes supporting targeted desexing initiatives by funding high-intensity programs in high-risk areas, establishing subsidized high-volume desexing clinics, and deploying mobile services in collaboration with veterinarians and welfare agencies.
- Additionally, **removing legislative barriers** is essential; this involves permitting the desexing of cats cared for by semi-owners without requiring formal ownership, with cats microchipped and the secondary contact and phone numbers are for an organisation (welfare or rescue group) or business (for farm and factory cats) and allowing Return to Field (RTF) programs in areas without

conservation concerns. Addressing affordability and accessibility is also crucial, which can be achieved by providing subsidies for low-income cat owners and semi-owners to access free or affordable desexing services without restrictive eligibility criteria, and supporting transport initiatives, especially in regional and underserved areas.

- **Improving messaging** and community information is vital to promote understanding of the root causes of free-roaming cats and advocate for evidence-based solutions, while avoiding stigmatising cat ownership or implementing punitive measures like containment laws that disproportionately affect disadvantaged populations and are ineffective in reducing the number of free-roaming cats because they do not address the root causes. Implementing these recommendations can lead to humane, effective, and equitable policies that mitigate cat overpopulation, thereby reducing the financial and emotional burdens on communities and stakeholders.
- **Targeted messaging** should utilize methods such as direct mail, SMS, community outreach programs, and local support networks to reach socially isolated residents, ensuring they are aware of available assistance for cat management and welfare. Providing clear, practical information on affordable containment solutions, including subsidies for enclosures, DIY options, and local support services, can empower residents to make informed decisions while protecting both their pets and native wildlife.

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