

**INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES
RESPONSE TO SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTIONS**

DATE 31 January 2025

1. At the hearing on 16 December 2024, another witness gave the following evidence about RSPCA NSW's Keeping Cats Safe At Home program:

"All it is is a page on a website that says, "Here is a pretty downloadable PDF from the RSPCA and here is a video that you can watch." That is the resource. That is what you spent \$2.5 million on.

Given this evidence was given after RSPCA NSW appeared at the hearing, would you like to respond to this statement and provide any corrections or clarifications to the Committee? Can you also please provide a breakdown of how the funding you received from the NSW Government for the Keeping Cats Safe At Home program has been spent and the positive outcomes that have been achieved with this funding?

The statement above grossly misrepresents the program's scope, activities, and outcomes.

The *KCSAH* program was the result of an agreement between RSPCA NSW and the Office of Environment and Heritage to conduct a four-year, multi-disciplinary initiative aimed at reducing the negative impacts of roaming pet cats on wildlife while improving cat welfare.

The program was governed by a deed, compliant with public sector reporting standards, and included specific and targeted milestones and deliverables. It was acquitted throughout and at its conclusion in accordance with the funding deed and with Environmental Trust oversight.

Contrary to the claim that *KCSAH* was simply an online resource, the program funded deliverables are summarised below:

- Over 2,700 cats were desexed, and 1,721 cats were microchipped at no cost to owners.
- Subsidised and targeted desexing and microchipping programs were provided, particularly in lower socio-economic areas.
- 11 direct partnerships with Councils across NSW to implement education and community engagement initiatives.
- Targeted ecological monitoring was conducted to measure changes in free-roaming cat density using camera traps in partnership with the University of New England.
- A tailored behaviour change strategy was developed in consultation with expert Dr Lynette McLeod.
- A comprehensive social marketing campaign, including radio, TV, and social media outreach reached more than 3.5 million people.

- School-based education programs engaged over 1,400 children and normalised responsible cat ownership from an early age.
- More than 30 community events directly engaging over 36,000 people.
- Information resources distributed through more than 80 partner veterinary clinics, councils, and rehoming organisations.
- A dedicated email newsletter ("The Cat-ch Up!") with over 4,000 subscribers providing ongoing cat care advice and support.
- Scientific contributions, including four peer-reviewed publications in international journals.

Positive Outcomes:

The program exceeded its targets in nearly every area:

- Significant reductions in roaming cat populations in key council areas:
 - Blue Mountains: 25% reduction
 - Campbelltown: 35% reduction
 - Tweed Shire: 50% reduction
- Decrease in nuisance complaints related to roaming cats:
 - Over 40% decrease in seven project councils.
 - Over 60% decrease in four project councils.
- Reductions in the number of cats impounded by councils:
 - Blue Mountains: 54% decrease
 - Campbelltown: 59% decrease
 - Parramatta: 73% decrease
 - Kyogle & Walgett: 100% decrease

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

RSPCA NSW opposes cat containment laws, as detailed in our submission and evidence for the following reasons:

- There is an unacceptable welfare impost on cats. Not all cats can be contained without suffering poor welfare. Some cats struggle with full-time containment due to their behavioural needs.
- Not all cat caregivers can contain cats where they live. Renters, and people with less disposable income are likely to be disproportionately affected, as many landlords do not allow indoor cats or pet modifications, and containment infrastructure (e.g., catios, secure fencing) can be costly.
- Mandatory containment is likely to lead to increased surrenders and abandonment. Pet owners who cannot comply due to financial or housing constraints may be forced to surrender or abandon their cats, placing greater burdens on council pounds and animal welfare organisations that are already struggling with overpopulation.

- Mandating cat containment undermines unowned cat management efforts. Many unowned cats (semi-owned cats) rely on informal caregivers who provide food and care but do not consider themselves owners. Adding legal containment requirements will discourage these caregivers from taking on ownership responsibility, undermining interventions designed to manage and reduce unowned cat populations through desexing and support programs.

Additional Concerns related to the cost of living crisis:

1. Financial burden on pet owners
 - The cost of retrofitting properties for cat containment is significant.
 - Households are already struggling with rent, food, and utilities, and may be unable to meet the cost of retro-fitting, or any financial penalty associated with the regulatory impost if cat containment is legislated.
2. Disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups
 - Renters – are often not permitted under leases to modify properties for cat containment.
 - Low-income households – may struggle to afford modification or provide indoor enrichment. This type of behaviour change is also difficult. Cat behaviour is often not particularly well understood. This is where KCSH is vital because it permits that change to be adopted over time and in a supported manner.
 - People experiencing domestic and family violence often need temporary housing where containment is not possible.
 - Older Australians & people with disabilities may lack the means or physical capacity to create secure enclosures.
3. Increased pressure on pounds & rescue organisations
 - Studies do not provide data demonstrating that cat containment has improved outcomes in Victoria. However, a study does indicate that councils with higher euthanasia rates often have lower reclaim and rehoming rates, suggesting that factors such as community engagement and support services play more significant roles in these outcomes. For instance, a study analysing Victorian councils found that the mean euthanasia rate for cats was 48%, with only one council achieving a euthanasia rate of $\leq 10\%$ for cats. The study highlighted that councils with low euthanasia rates had higher reclaim and rehoming rates, emphasising the importance of effective community engagement and support services in improving these outcomes. The study can be accessed [here](#).
 - Council pounds and rescues, which are already overwhelmed and required to hold cats for longer periods following the implementation of s64B *Companion Animals Act 1998* (NSW) amendment, may face an unmanageable influx of cats.
4. Lack of evidence that containment laws are effective
 - The RSPCA NSW submission (2024) describes the findings that councils with containment laws have not demonstrated measurable reductions in cat complaints or wandering.
 - Education-based programs, such as *Keeping Cats Safe At Home*, have been proven to be more effective in increasing containment rates without financial penalties.

Better Alternatives

Rather than punitive laws, the government should:

- Expand subsidised containment programs, similar to existing desexing subsidies.
- Introduce incentives (e.g., council rebates, reduced pet registration fees) for cat owners who voluntarily contain their pets.
- Continue investment in public education campaigns, which have already led to higher voluntary containment rates.

The RSPCA position paper has more detail and can be accessed online [here](#).

2. 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?

There is no evidence that education and targeted behaviour change programs are ineffective without containment laws. The results of the KCSAH evaluation (described above and attached herewith) demonstrate the opposite. The important point is that education-based approaches, when coupled with complementary strategies such as subsidised desexing, microchipping, and behaviour change programs, have been shown to be highly effective in increasing voluntary cat containment.

The *Keeping Cats Safe At Home* evaluation suggests that cat containment is becoming a social norm and community expectation and that it works to increase cat caregiver psychological capacity and motivation to contain their cats.

This is reflected in the measurable impacts of the *Keeping Cats Safe At Home* program, which has successfully reduced roaming cat populations, cat-related nuisance complaints, and impound rates without the need for punitive responses to the cat problem. The results of KCSAH are detailed in our answer to the first question (above).

There is no compelling evidence that mandating containment impacts cat caregiver behaviour. However, evidence strongly supports the effectiveness of education and voluntary containment initiatives.

1. Education addresses the psychological and practical barriers to containment
 - Research from *Keeping Cats Safe At Home* indicates that many cat caregivers want to contain their cats but do not know how to do so effectively.
 - The biggest barriers to containment are perceived difficulty, cost, and lack of knowledge—not unwillingness.
 - Providing practical guidance, resources, and financial support has been far more effective in changing owner behaviour than imposing penalties.
2. Punitive laws can backfire and lead to worse outcomes

- In Victoria, councils that enforced containment laws have reported higher impoundment rates, increased euthanasia, and greater financial strain on shelters.
 - Renters and low-income pet owners often cannot comply due to housing restrictions, leading to higher rates of pet relinquishment or abandonment.
 - Instead of fostering cooperation, punitive laws can create resentment, making people less likely to engage with councils and shelters.
3. Behaviour change takes time—punitive laws do not create cultural shifts
- Cultural shifts in pet ownership, such as leash laws for dogs, did not happen overnight—they required long-term public education.
 - In areas where cat containment is now the norm, this was achieved through sustained education and community buy-in, not penalties.

Our experience and research through *Keeping Cats Safe At Home* demonstrates that:

- Cat containment is already becoming a social norm and community expectation without the need for punitive laws.
- Social marketing and education campaigns are effective at increasing cat caregiver motivation to contain their cats.
- There is no compelling evidence that mandatory containment laws influence cat caregiver behaviour.
- Regulating ahead of the social and behaviour change already underway risks alienating those voluntarily containing their cats, and inflicts financial hardship, increase shelter intakes, and disproportionately affects low-income pet owners.

Expanding investment in education, targeted desexing, and incentive-based programs will yield far better long-term results for cats, their owners, and wildlife.

- 3. 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?**

RSPCA NSW does not support parliament moving ahead of the regulator’s capacity to enforce the law uniformly. From a first principles perspective, there is an inherent unfairness in legislating when residents in one LGA will be subject to strict enforcement, whilst residents in others (those councils incapable of meeting the regulatory impost) will not be. This has never been the way NSW has been prepared to legislate.

Whilst proponents point to the potential for legislation to promote behaviour change, it cannot be at the risk of significant unintended consequences, including poor animal welfare outcomes. Accordingly, it is inappropriate to consider changing legislation to allow councils to

introduce cat containment laws now, where the Committee has taken evidence that some individual councils lack the capacity to enforce them.

Mandating cat containment without adequate resourcing and preparation risks a range of negative outcomes, including:

- Increased deliberate harm and cruelty to roaming cats
 - As detailed in the hearing, punitive containment laws introduced without enforcement capacity have led to members of the public taking matters into their own hands in some instances.
 - This could lead to an increase in cat trapping by individuals who see roaming cats as a nuisance, resulting in higher rates of harm, neglect, and cruelty against cats.
- Increased abandonment and surrender of owned cats
 - Many cat caregivers, particularly renters, low-income households, and those in crisis situations, may not be able to meet new containment requirements.
 - If containment is mandated without financial support for pet owners, this will likely result in increased surrender and abandonment of cats, placing further pressure on already overburdened council pounds and rescue organisations.
- Increased “stray” cat intake and euthanasia at council pounds
 - If councils introduce containment laws without enforcement resources, members of the public may start capturing and delivering cats to the pound, assuming they are uncontained illegally.
 - This will increase intake numbers, leading to higher euthanasia rates due to space limitations and the inability to rehome a large volume of impounded cats.
- Additional barriers to humane management of unowned cat populations
 - Unowned (semi-owned) cats are often cared for informally by community members, many of whom already participate in desexing and rehoming efforts.
 - These caregivers may withdraw their support if containment is legally required, fearing legal consequences for allowing uncontained cats to remain on their property.
 - This would undermine humane interventions such as targeted desexing programs, which have been shown to be one of the most effective ways to reduce unowned cat populations over time.

Further Problems for Councils

1. Inability to enforce laws could damage public trust
 - When Parliament introduces laws, knowing that Councils lack the resources to enforce them consistently, inequities will likely be highlighted, leading to a lack of trust and loss of credibility amongst public institutions.
 - This could lead to frustration from those who support containment (who expect enforcement) and those opposed to the laws (who feel unfairly targeted).
2. Financial and operational burden on Councils

- Many Councils already struggle with limited budgets for animal management and have overcrowded pounds with limited rehoming capacity.
 - If they are pressured to enforce new containment laws without additional funding, this will divert resources away from other essential animal welfare programs.
3. Disproportionate impact on lower-income communities
- Wealthier councils have the ability to fund containment programs and education efforts, while financially constrained councils may be forced to focus on punitive enforcement due to a lack of resources for community education and support.
 - This may exacerbate existing inequalities, disproportionately impacting lower-income pet owners who are less able to afford containment solutions.

Granting councils the power to introduce cat containment laws before they have the financial or operational capacity to enforce them may:

- Risk an increase in poor animal welfare outcomes, abandonment, and euthanasia of cats.
- Place unfair pressure on cat caregivers, particularly renters and low-income households.
- Overwhelm council pounds with an influx of surrendered or captured cats.
- Undermine humane cat population management strategies, such as subsidised desexing programs.
- Create financial and enforcement challenges for councils, leading to public dissatisfaction and ineffective implementation.

Rather than rushing to introduce containment laws without proper funding and capacity building in a targeted way across NSW, the focus should be on expanding voluntary containment education, incentive-based programs, and humane management strategies, all of which have already demonstrated successful outcomes in reducing roaming cat populations.