

Submission  
No 4

## INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

**Organisation:** Sydney Dogs & Cats Home

**Date Received:** 22 October 2024

---

# SYDNEY DOGS & CATS HOME

30 October 2024

To The Director and the Hon Emma Hurst MLC Chairperson  
Portfolio Committee 8, Parliament House  
Macquarie Street NSW 2000

**Subject: Response to NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into the management of cat populations in NSW.**

Sydney Dogs & Cats Home is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into the management of cat populations. As a long-established organisation dedicated to the welfare of companion animals, we aim to offer informed, practical strategies that address cat overpopulation and improve welfare outcomes across New South Wales.

Our submission outlines the significant impact that feral and free-roaming domestic cats have on native wildlife, particularly in metropolitan and regional areas. We propose the implementation of humane, preventive approaches such as **Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) programs**, alongside **mass desexing** and **responsible pet ownership initiatives** to address these challenges.

We highlight the importance of **cat containment policies**, which have proven effective in reducing wildlife predation and controlling free-roaming cat populations. These measures should be supported by public education and financial assistance for containment infrastructure. Our submission also emphasizes the need for **community education** on desexing, microchipping, and containment, which will reduce the number of stray and feral cats entering the pound system.

In addition, we recommend legislative reforms that include **mandatory desexing laws**, **pet retailer regulations**, and **support for vulnerable pet owners**, which will help to prevent cats from becoming homeless. We further propose stronger enforcement of **microchipping and registration** laws and advocate for enhanced **tenant rights** to prevent pet surrenders due to housing restrictions.

# SYDNEY DOGS & CATS HOME

The success of these strategies hinges on collaboration between government bodies, local councils, animal welfare organisations, and the community. With sustained investment in prevention programs and legislative support, we believe a more humane and effective system for managing cat populations in NSW can be achieved, benefiting both cats and the wider environment.

## **Who we are:**

Since 1946, Sydney Dogs & Cats Home has cared for Sydney's lost abandoned and neglected pets. As Sydney's only charity pound and community facility, we open our doors to thousands of pets each year, currently servicing 6 council areas and helping over a million Sydneysiders and their pets.

At Sydney Dogs & Cats Home, we support the Getting to Zero Movement and we strive to rehome every healthy and treatable animal that comes through our doors. We're proud to say we never place a time limit on any rehomable animal awaiting adoption.

We also deliver a range of successful community programs, creating a lifeline for both the animals in our care and for those in the community who need it most.

## **(a) Impact of Cats on Threatened Native Animals in Metropolitan and Regional Settings**

Cats, particularly feral and free-roaming domestic cats, pose a significant threat to native wildlife in both metropolitan and regional settings. Studies have shown that cats are responsible for the predation of billions of native animals annually in Australia, including threatened species of birds, reptiles, and small mammals. Research highlights that feral cats can have catastrophic impacts on biodiversity, especially in regions where native animals have not evolved alongside such predators.

To mitigate this impact, **Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)** programs are increasingly seen as a humane method for managing cat populations, especially when combined with containment policies for pet cats. Public education on responsible pet ownership and the enforcement of desexing laws can reduce the number of free-roaming cats that contribute to this environmental issue. In urban settings, desexed and contained cats pose less of a threat to wildlife, and promoting these practices can lessen their ecological footprint.

# SYDNEY DOGS & CATS HOME

## **(b) Effectiveness of Cat Containment Policies and Barriers to Implementation**

Cat containment policies are effective in reducing predation on wildlife and controlling the population of free-roaming cats. The success of containment policies in the ACT provides a strong precedent for their implementation in New South Wales, particularly when combined with public education campaigns and support from local councils. These policies help protect native wildlife, prevent unplanned litters, and improve the welfare of domestic cats by reducing the risks associated with roaming, such as traffic accidents, fights, and disease transmission.

However, one of the primary barriers to broader implementation is public resistance, often driven by misconceptions about the necessity and benefits of containment. Many cat owners are not fully aware of the ecological impact that free-roaming cats have on native wildlife, nor do they recognise the risks posed to the cats themselves. Additionally, concerns about restricting their pets' natural behaviours, such as roaming, are common.

Research indicates that indoor or contained cats generally live longer, healthier lives, free from the dangers associated with free roaming. However, for containment policies to be successful, they must be introduced gradually, with community engagement playing a pivotal role in easing the transition. A phased approach to containment would allow both pet owners and councils time to adjust to new regulations and mitigate potential resistance.

### **Suggested Implementation Strategy**

In wildlife hotspots, a full containment strategy should be considered. A gradual implementation strategy could begin with introducing nighttime curfews in non-wildlife hotspot areas, where free-roaming cats are required to be indoors or confined between dusk and dawn. Nighttime is when cats are most active in hunting and are also more vulnerable to dangers like car accidents and animal fights. A curfew during these hours would be a manageable first step for many cat owners and would immediately reduce risks to both wildlife and the cats themselves.

This phased approach allows local councils to monitor compliance and gauge the public's readiness for more comprehensive containment measures. Over time, these policies can be extended to full 24-hour containment, particularly in wildlife-sensitive areas or hotspots where the impact of free-roaming cats on native species is more severe.

To ensure success, local councils should:

# SYDNEY DOGS & CATS HOME

- **Introduce public education campaigns** to inform communities about the benefits of containment for both wildlife and cats. These campaigns could emphasize that contained cats tend to live healthier, longer lives and face fewer threats from the environment.
- **Offer subsidies or incentives** for cat-proof fencing, outdoor enclosures, and other containment solutions to assist cat owners in creating safe, enriching environments for their pets.
- Work with veterinarians and animal welfare organisations to provide guidance on how to transition cats to contained environments, including advice on enrichment and reducing stress.
- Gradually extend curfews to daytime hours, with full containment being the eventual goal, particularly in areas where wildlife is under significant threat.

**Community engagement** will be critical throughout the process. Cat owners should be provided with resources to help them understand and comply with the new regulations. For example, local councils could offer workshops or informational materials on how to create enriching indoor environments for cats, which can include toys, scratching posts, and safe outdoor enclosures that allow for natural behaviours like climbing and exploring without the risks of roaming freely.

By progressively implementing containment policies, starting with nighttime curfews and moving toward full containment, NSW can strike a balance between protecting wildlife and promoting the welfare of domestic cats. This approach, combined with community education and local council support, will make containment policies more palatable to the public and increase long-term compliance.

## **(c) Welfare Outcomes for Cats Under Contained Conditions**

Concerns regarding the welfare of cats under contained conditions typically centre around their ability to express natural behaviours such as hunting, roaming, and climbing. However, studies suggest that with appropriate environmental enrichment—such as toys, scratching posts, and safe outdoor enclosures—cats can lead enriched and fulfilling lives within contained spaces. Research shows that contained cats experience fewer health risks, including those from parasites, injury, and disease, contributing to longer life expectancy.

# SYDNEY DOGS & CATS HOME

We strongly advocate for the integration of enrichment strategies in cat containment policies to ensure welfare standards. For instance, strategies such as offering diverse play opportunities and interaction with owners can help mitigate any negative effects of confinement. Additionally, ensuring that containment is implemented in conjunction with proper veterinary care ensures high welfare standards.

## **(d) Effectiveness of Community Education Programs and Responsible Pet Ownership Initiatives**

Community education is fundamental in addressing the issues of cat overpopulation and its impact on wildlife. Research shows that public awareness campaigns promoting desexing, microchipping, and containment can lead to significant reductions in the number of stray and feral cats.

Initiatives that target responsible pet ownership—especially in regions with high stray populations—are key to preventing cats from entering the pound system. Ensuring that communities understand the importance of microchipping not only facilitates the return of lost pets but also reduces the intake of cats into pounds. Subsidised desexing programs, particularly for low-income pet owners, can increase compliance and reduce the likelihood of abandoned or stray animals.

## **(e) Implications for Local Councils in Implementing and Enforcing Cat Containment Policies**

The enforcement of cat containment policies presents logistical and financial challenges for local councils, including the need for monitoring, enforcement personnel, and public education efforts. However, councils that invest in containment policies often see reductions in cat-related complaints, such as nuisance behaviour and threats to wildlife, which can ultimately reduce costs associated with cat management.

To support local councils in implementing these policies, government funding for infrastructure—such as safe outdoor enclosures and low-cost desexing clinics—can ease the financial burden. Additionally, public education campaigns should focus on the benefits of containment, not just for wildlife but for the cats themselves. Collaborations with veterinary clinics and animal welfare organisations can help streamline efforts and ensure effective implementation.

# SYDNEY DOGS & CATS HOME

## **(f) Effectiveness and Benefits of Large-Scale Cat Desexing Programs**

Large-scale desexing programs have proven highly effective in reducing the number of stray and feral cats entering the pound system. There is extensive research to support mass desexing programs can drastically reduce unplanned litters, alleviating the pressure on pounds and rescue groups. Desexing not only prevents overpopulation but also has significant welfare benefits for cats, reducing the risk of certain diseases and undesirable behaviours such as roaming and fighting.

In regions where desexing programs have been successfully implemented, there has been a noticeable reduction in the number of feral and stray cats, as well as fewer cats surrendered to shelters due to behavioural issues. Government-supported, large-scale desexing programs should be prioritised, with a focus on accessibility for low-income families and community cat caregivers.

## **(g) Impact of Potential Cat Containment Measures on the Pound System**

Cat containment measures can significantly reduce the number of cats entering pounds. Stray and feral cats make up a large percentage of pound intake, contributing to overcrowded facilities and high euthanasia rates. By preventing cats from roaming and supporting TNR programs for feral cats, containment measures can ease the strain on pounds, allowing for better care of the animals that do enter the system.

Proactive containment and desexing measures are crucial to reducing euthanasia rates and improving welfare outcomes in shelters. With fewer cats entering pounds, resources can be redirected toward adoption programs, medical care, and rehabilitation efforts, creating a more sustainable system overall.

## **(h) Outcomes of Similar Policies on Cat Containment in Other Australian States or Territories**

In the ACT, mandatory cat containment policies have led to fewer cat-related wildlife deaths and reduced the number of stray cats entering shelters. These policies have also been linked to higher rates of responsible pet ownership, as residents are educated about the benefits of keeping cats indoors or in outdoor enclosures. Drawing from the ACT's experience, we support

# SYDNEY DOGS & CATS HOME

broader implementation of containment policies in other states including NSW, emphasizing the role of education and accessible and affordable desexing programs and enrichment in ensuring compliance.

## (i) Options for Reducing the Feral Cat Population

There is a key distinction between feral cats, which are typically found in regional areas, and the owned or semi-owned (community) cats more commonly seen in metropolitan regions of NSW.

**Feral cats** in regional areas are often completely wild, having no contact with humans, and rely on hunting wildlife for survival. These cats pose a significant threat to native species, particularly in sensitive ecosystems where predation by feral cats can lead to the decline of endangered animals. Managing these populations in regional areas can be challenging, as they often live in remote locations and form larger colonies. **Culling** has traditionally been used in some regions but is largely ineffective in the long term due to rapid reproduction and migration of new cats into vacated territories.

In contrast, **community cats**—owned or semi-owned—are typically seen in urban or suburban areas. These cats often receive some care from local residents, typically food and sometimes shelter, but are often uncontained and allowed to roam freely. Though these cats may have some human interaction, they contribute to the growing issue of unplanned litters and can also have a negative impact on local wildlife.

To effectively manage both feral and community cat populations, **legalised and well-funded Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) programs** and widespread **desexing initiatives** are essential. TNR programs, where cats are humanely trapped, desexed, and then returned to their original location, have proven successful in managing community cat colonies in metropolitan areas by preventing reproduction. This strategy helps reduce the number of unwanted cats and prevents the influx of cats into the pound system.

Professor Jacqui Rand who has done extensive research around effective TNR programs is a strong proponent of TNR, advocating that it is more humane and sustainable than culling, particularly in regional areas. Culling often leads to a rebound effect, with remaining cats reproducing at higher rates or new feral cats migrating to the vacated area, thereby failing to control populations in the long term. TNR, on the other hand, stabilises the population and improves the welfare of both feral and community cats.



# SYDNEY DOGS & CATS HOME

By integrating these approaches, NSW can achieve a more humane and effective method of managing both feral and community cat populations, reducing their impact on native wildlife and decreasing the number of cats entering pounds.

## **(j) Any Other Related Matters**

The overpopulation of homeless cats remains a significant challenge for pounds and animal rescue organisations. Legalising and implementing targeted **Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)** programs, alongside funded desexing initiatives for community cats, can drastically reduce the number of homeless cats and improve their welfare. **Sydney Dogs & Cats Home** is committed to supporting local councils and communities with effective cat management strategies, particularly through prevention-focused programs.

Prevention measures, such as mass desexing, are crucial for achieving low-cost and sustainable animal management. Desexing programs not only reduce council impounding costs but also proactively prevent unwanted animals, nuisance issues, feral cat populations, and the associated impact on wildlife. These programs are also key to reducing euthanasia rates in pounds.

We support the introduction of **mandatory desexing laws** for companion animals as a cornerstone of a long-term solution. Desexing, when combined with public education, responsible pet ownership initiatives, and collaboration between local councils, animal welfare organisations, and the state government, will create a more sustainable system for managing cat populations and improving animal welfare.

To achieve this, **legislative reform** will be necessary in several key areas:

- **Mandatory Desexing:** Enacting laws that mandate the desexing of all companion animals in NSW is essential for controlling the cat population, preventing unplanned litters, and reducing the number of cats entering pounds. Exemptions for registered breeders and cases where desexing is medically inadvisable would need to be carefully considered.
- **Pet Retailer Regulations:** Stricter regulations for pet retailers should ensure that cats are sourced from reputable breeders or rescue organisations. This would help prevent impulse purchases and reduce the abandonment of cats.
- **Microchipping and Registration:** Strengthened enforcement of microchipping and registration laws will ensure that lost pets are reunited with their owners more effectively and hold pet owners accountable.

# SYDNEY DOGS & CATS HOME

- **Public Awareness and Education:** Establishing legislation to support public awareness campaigns and mandating animal welfare education in schools will promote responsible pet ownership and the adoption of cats from shelters.
- **Tenant and Housing Rights:** Legislation should be introduced to protect the rights of pet owners in rental properties, reducing the surrender of pets due to housing restrictions.
- **Support for Vulnerable Pet Owners:** Allocating funds for programs that provide financial assistance, temporary housing, and veterinary care to low-income individuals, seniors, and people with disabilities will prevent pet surrenders due to financial hardship.
- **Community Cat Management:** Legalising and implementing TNR programs will help manage the community cat population, reduce the number of unowned cats entering pounds, and decrease euthanasia rates.

Sustainable change requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach involving government bodies, animal welfare experts, veterinarians, and the public. Effective collaboration and communication among these stakeholders are essential to achieving responsible pet ownership and best-practice animal welfare, while minimising the number of cats entering pounds.

We welcome the opportunity to further discuss these recommendations and look forward to working together to create a compassionate approach to cat population management.

Thank you for considering our perspective.

Sincerely,

Melissa Penn  
Managing Director  
Sydney Dogs & Cats Home