

Submission
No 2

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Urban Kittens Rescue Group

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INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

This submission has been completed by Urban Kittens Rescue Group
Rehoming Organisation Number- R251000091 – written by Tess Michaels, Lisa Walpole and Daed Vider

ABOUT URBAN KITTENS

Urban Kittens is an affiliation of like-minded individuals who care for the lost, abandoned and un-homed kittens and cats, predominantly in the Bayside and Randwick areas of Sydney NSW.

We believe in the institution of mandatory desexing and working in conjunction with State and Local government bodies to establish discounted microchipping and desexing programs, as well as guidelines and policies in respect to the humane treatment of animals that come into their care.

<https://www.urbankittens.com/>
<https://www.facebook.com/UrbanKittens>

MAIN SUBMISSION

Terms of Reference

This submission will focus on the Terms of Reference – (b), (d), (e), (f), (h) and (j) specifically as detailed below.

The effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers

We believe that mandatory cat containment is an ineffective strategy and results in the failure of reducing free roaming cats in both short and long terms, as proven in both Australia and international countries.

Many wandering cats are unowned, having been born as kittens on the street or abandoned or dumped by past owners (both microchipped and unchipped). If these cats are owned, more often than not containment isn't available to their owners due to factors such as housing limitations (e.g., rental properties), lack of financial resources or because of their concerns about the welfare of confined cats.

Mandatory cat containment actively prevents the resolution of the longstanding free-roaming stray cat issue because it creates a major barrier to cat semi-owners adopting the stray cat they are feeding.

Mandatory containment will not protect native wildlife from potential predation by cats, the commonly cited justification, because it does not measurably reduce the number of free-roaming cats over time.

As a rescue group our primary policy for adoption is to adopt ONLY to applicants who've indicated that the animals will be cared for indoor only, or indoor – outdoor via a cat enclosure or supervised outdoor access. In this way we support and promote cat containment for animals we rehome. The primacy of the policy enables us to have conversations with potential adopters in respect to the different opportunities and threats faced by cats living in both situations to ensure adopters are fully aware of the dangers that exist. We believe that the education of existing/potential owners is essential to reduction of free roaming cats, this key concept being supported by the views, research and findings of the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation.

The RSPCA Australia report, "Identifying Best Practice Domestic Cat Management in Australia 2018" states, "Overall, councils with cat containment regulations have not been able to demonstrate any measurable reduction in cat complaints or cats wandering at large following the introduction of the regulations".

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) strongly encourages inside containment of cats at night, and where possible, contained to the owner's property during the day in a comfortable environment which meets the cat's physical and mental needs.

However, the APWF is strongly opposed to mandatory cat containment (night curfews and 24/7) because it leads to increased cat nuisance complaints, increased cat impoundments, increased healthy cat and kitten euthanasia, increased costs and enforcement difficulties for local governments, increased mental health damage to pound and veterinary staff and community residents caused by euthanizing healthy cats and kittens, and no reduction in the overall number of wandering cats.

The effectiveness of community education programs and responsible pet ownership initiatives

The community cat rescuers' efforts minimise the burden of pets entering the council pound systems and large animal welfare shelters (RSPCA, AWL NSW, CPS NSW)

Community rescues, due to their size and comprehensive adoption procedures, can provide 1-1 community education to potential adopters and community members in respect to the erroneous belief that cats need to be outdoors. At UKRG our adoption process involves potential adopters initially being in contact with our foster carers who are all trained regarding responsible pet ownership and care. This relationship then extends to our adoption team whereby potential homes are assessed – visually and via an extensive interview process that allows for questions and the communication of 'best practice' in pet ownership.

As a rescue we believe that general large group education programs do not provide the change in thinking about cat ownership that is required. We consider that Pound policies, in relation to educational programs should be refocused, at pound and shelter levels, to encourage more 1-1 engagement with potential adopters.

Implications for local councils in implementing and enforcing cat containment policies

As a community rescue group, we reject the current approach to free-roaming stray cats which includes trap/adopt or kill, trap/kill or kill programs which have been used routinely by Councils and prominent shelters in Australia for decades and have failed to reduce the number of free-roaming stray cats in NSW (NSW Pound Data Reports). Often what these policies do is simply clear the targeted area for other cats to encroach into them. With the exponential breeding rate of felines within a short time the number of cats is back to or surpassing pre-kill levels.

The current approach by Councils and shelters results in high euthanasia rates and has an exceptionally high socio-economic cost (Chua 2023) including causing profoundly negative mental health impacts to veterinarians and pound staff and contributing to high staff attrition.

On average, councils operating their own facilities are killing 46% of impounded cats and kittens in NSW. The worst quartile of councils with intakes of >50 cats in New South Wales had estimated euthanasia rates from 67% to 100% (Chua 2023).

Many Councils are resistant to working with community rescue groups or even discussing free-roaming stray cats and possible interventions.

In our work we've experienced, threats, harassment and obfuscation from members of the LGA's we operate within. A good example of this relates to a managed, desexed colony in the Arncliffe area wherein the Bayside Council contracted pest controllers to trap and then relocate all of cats to one of the main shelters in Sydney. These cats had all been desexed, were well fed daily and were not causing any on-site damage or concern. Council refused to discuss this situation with us. Our rescue was required to pay fees to obtain the cats back, relocate them to foster carers and rehome them which took a large amount of our resources and was essentially punitive in its nature.

We believe that some Councils have indicated that they prefer to adopt State mandatory cat containment policies due to intentional lack of information in respect to effective cat management strategies, and for others it is a simplistic solution so as to appear to do something without committing any time, consideration, resources or funding. This statement is borne from 8 years of frustration and heartbreak of dealing with the afore-mentioned administrators.

The free roaming cat issue requires a relationship between animal rescues and Councils that allows for open communication to implement programs that work, such as cat desexing.

The effectiveness and benefits to implementing large scale cat desexing programs TNR – desexing stray cats

We support large scale (mass / high intensity) desexing programs for owned, semi owned and unowned cats. These funded programs should be offered free for those on low incomes, carers and rescuers of semi owned cats (community cat rescuers), and for people in areas of high intensity cat populations to make a rapid and effective reduction in numbers of cats.

We also believe that Council and community rescue groups work together on these programs to ensure they are effective and meet the requirements of the community

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) Community Cat programs in Queensland have been active in several Ipswich suburbs operating since 2021 targeting stray cats, including:

- desexing of urban stray cats, vaccinating and microchipping and if they are healthy and have been thriving outdoors, the cats are returned to where they live in their home territories
- desexing pet cats if their owners cannot afford to do so themselves
- adopting friendly cats and kittens found outdoors,
- increasing responsible pet cat ownership,
- decreasing abandonment and
- mediating resident conflicts involving outdoor cats

Our rescue has its own examples of effective cat desexing in areas within the Bayside and Randwick LGA's following these same targets as Ipswich which has reduced cat numbers and the number of kittens born annually. We would be open to discussing our work with Councils in these LGA's along with the wider community.

The outcomes of similar policies on cat containment in other Australian states or territories

Banyule Council in Victoria set up a free Community Cat program to desex, microchip and register owned and semi-owned stray cats, with a focus on suburbs with high cat-related calls. In just three years, the council reduced impoundments by 61% and cats killed by 74%. In contrast, after Yarra Ranges

Council (Vic) implemented mandatory containment, there was a 68% increase in impoundments, 143% increase in cat nuisance complaints and an 18% increase in euthanasia in the third year. Over 8 years of the Banyule program, euthanasia decreased to 0.2 cats/1000 residents compared to an average of 2 cats/1000 residents for NSW (Chua 2023).

The Keeping Cats Safe at Home (KCSAH) in NSW included key desexing programs.

The Weddin Council KCSAH desexing program offered free microchipping and desexing which included: Collaboratively working to achieve results for over 100 cats

The Parramatta Council KCSAH desexing program included an aim “to locate unowned cat hotspots and engage with overwhelmed cat carers and volunteer cat rescue groups” Results where cat-related nuisance complaints decreased by 49% and cats arriving at the council pound decreased by 41%.

Anecdotally, Campbelltown and Hornsby KCSAH desexing programs also critically included local carers and rescuers for semi owned and unowned cats.

About 3 years ago we approached Bayside Council on several occasions to discuss desexing programs, having done the initial groundwork to put them in touch with a national body who indicated they would subsidise the programme. Bayside were terse and dismissive. In the past 4 years we have not bothered pursuing a relationship, rather we have spent our time working with volunteers to create a self-funded animal welfare organisation within Bayside which essentially fulfils the LGA’s duties and obligations to the welfare of the animals within the area. Frequently we are in touch with community members who have contacted the council for assistance only to be referred to us.

If Councils are serious about implementing functional, ethical and humane animal management programmes they must be willing to engage with their local community rescue groups.

Any other related matters

The frequent use of the term ‘feral’ in relation to roaming cats (owned and free roaming strays) must be changed. Accuracy matters and miscategorisation can be a death sentence.

Cat management strategies should recognise three subcategories of domestic cats including:

1. Owned cats – these cats are identified with and cared for by a specific person and are directly dependent on humans. They are usually sociable, although sociability varies. These cats are also called pet cats.
2. Semi-owned cats – these cats are directly dependent on humans and are intentionally fed by people who do not consider they own them. These cats are of varying sociability and are sometimes called stray cats. They live in and around cities, towns and buildings on farming properties.
3. Unowned cats – these cats are indirectly dependent on humans and receive food from people unintentionally such as via food waste bins. These cats are of varying sociability and are sometimes called stray cats. They live in and around cities, towns and buildings on farming properties.

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., from food waste bins).

Feral cats are completely unsocialised to humans and have none of their needs fulfilled by humans.

Finally, we believe that animal rescue organisations should receive funding to cover the costs of preventative care and veterinary care for the rescue animals they are rehoming. It is without question

that rescues play a vital role in animal management and pet ownership education.

Our rescue was extremely grateful for the recent Office of Local Government grant we received 1/7/23 – 30/6/24 and would support an ongoing grant of some kind to rehoming organisations for them to build on their work and to enable them to assist smaller community cat rescuers to reduce free roaming stray cat numbers.

This level of support enabled us to increase our intake numbers and rehome a significantly larger number of kittens and cats, desex more cats in our community and develop educational resources for carers and those wanting to adopt cats.

Rescues such as ours need and welcome participation in decisions regarding the management of cat populations.

SIGNATURE OF CHARITY REPRESENTATIVE: TESS MICHAELS - Director

(Tess Michaels) - Urban Kittens Rescue Group

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