

Submission
No 93

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Cat Protection Society of NSW

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Submission from the Cat Protection Society of NSW

NSW Legislative Council Animal Welfare Committee Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission.

The Cat Protection Society of NSW cares about cats and the people who love them. We've been assisting street cats to find loving homes since 1958 and have always advocated for practices and policies that would improve the lives of cats, people, and the natural environment.

We were the first shelter in NSW to practice early-age desexing and rehome only desexed kittens and cats. Early-age desexing (EAD) (before 16 weeks) is critical to population management. We invested in education videos on EAD which are available at no charge for veterinarians at [Cat Care](#)

We have a range of videos and written information for the general public on the benefits of EAD, including translated factsheets and videos in [community languages](#).

We launched the Good Neighbour Project in 2016, and this includes a suite of resources to help cat owners keep their cats safe and protect wildlife [Good Neighbour Project](#).

As well as rehoming cats through our physical shelter, we offer adoptions through our program [Adopt-a-Stray](#) which provides desexing, vaccination, microchipping and registration, plus information and support from our feline health and welfare team, for only \$100. This supports people who've found and are feeding a stray cat to take all the necessary steps for the cat's health and to formally welcome the cat into their home, at an affordable price. In 2023-24, we found homes for 515 cats and kittens via our shelter, and 1,281 cats and kittens via Adopt-a-Stray.

We know that cost is a barrier to desexing ([Ipsos Cat Welfare Survey 2023](#)). In addition to Adopt-a-Stray, we also offer discounted desexing programs and vaccination referrals for cat owners. In 2023-24 we assisted 2,173 cats with desexing and 621 cats with F3 vaccinations under these programs.

In 2023, we received a grant of \$1.5m from the NSW Government to deliver a two-year, targeted cat desexing program, which we've called DIVA Cats (Desexing, Identification and Vaccination Assistance for Cats). To the end of September 2024, 1,844 cats and kittens had been desexed under the DIVA Cats program, which we offer in addition to the services described above. We are an authorised registration agent and in 2023-24, we lifetime registered 2,782 cats in our programs (taking the burden of registration off councils).

Cat Protection adopts a One Health/One Welfare framework. Ideally, One Health/One Welfare should be the approach in all policy development.

In considering the management of cat populations, it is essential to take a One Health/One Welfare approach because cats cannot be isolated as a separate entity; their lives are entwined with people, other animals and the environment around them. This means that

there can be no generic approach to the 'management' of cats because they live in a multitude of different circumstances and environments.

As a starting point, any policies need agreed definitions. Cat Protection supports the definitions of cats as given in the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation's submission (which have been adapted from the definitions in RSPCA Australia's report Identifying Best Practice Domestic Cat Management in Australia).

Secondly, but equally important, any policies need to recognise that habitats are highly specific, and situations are unique. Justifications for controls must be based on real, not perceived harms. Climate change and habitat loss are the major threats to Australian flora and fauna (and people), yet these threats are subsumed by moral panic around cats. Time and energy that could be applied to truly local research and strategy development that offers a humane and ethical approach is instead wasted on a binary argument that promotes alienation and distrust rather than building collaboration and engagement.

WIRES makes the point in their submission to this inquiry that "Welfare-based approaches benefit local communities, including those who care about and for wildlife – who are often the same people ..." and Cat Protection finds the same: people concerned with the wellbeing of cats are typically concerned with the wellbeing of *all* animals.

Most local councils do little or nothing in relation to cats, arguing they have no power, and that they can do nothing until laws are changed. In fact, they do have scope to do a lot; they choose not to and seek to give themselves a free pass by saying they're calling for regulatory change. "Slacktivism" comes to mind.

We acknowledge there are councils, particularly rural and remote, who cover vast geographic areas and with extremely limited resources. We appreciate that their capacity is minimal, if indeed they have any at all. As noted earlier, areas and situations are diverse, and each is unique. We also acknowledge that there are some councils who make a genuine effort, and who work with their communities and non-government organisations to improve the lives of cats, people and the environment. Unfortunately, they are in the minority and tend to depend on individual champions within council, either elected or staff.

It is telling that when Cat Protection launched the Good Neighbour Project and we sent brochures and information to all councils and offered further support (at no cost to councils) we received only a handful of responses. Local Government NSW calls for "awareness and education campaigns" on responsible cat ownership, but few councils bother to even provide links from their websites to the wealth of resources freely available on the websites of Cat Protection and the RSPCA. In fact, most council websites don't even feature "pets" as a subject on their home page, and when the pets section is found, it is usually focused on compliance issues.

One has to ask, if there already exist excellent resources on "responsible pet ownership" available free of charge to councils, why aren't they promoting them? Adding links to a website is hardly a drain on their resources and it is disappointing that good quality, practical and freely available information on cat care and welfare isn't included on every council's website.

Most councils promote the facilities they have for dogs, such as off-leash parks. These are good venues for providing information about cats, because multi-pet households are common; our Ipsos research showed about 40% of cat owners also own a dog. Council newsletters, libraries and community centres, not just council pounds or one-off pet days, are channels available to councils that can be used to promote positive cat care resources such as the Good Neighbour Project and the RSPCA's Keeping Cats Safe at Home.

There seems to be a cultural/historical problem where many councils put 'pets' into ranger and compliance services (and sometimes even "waste management") and their focus is on compliance to such a degree that companion animal staff don't have the time and aren't given the authority to do much else. This is a loss, because companion animal officers are typically committed to animal welfare and do their best within the constraints on them. To be clear, our references to 'councils' are not about companion animal staff.

If councils want to positively engage with their communities about animals, they need to bolster their companion animal teams and elevate their role in delivering services to their communities. Don't treat them as tick-a-box compliance officers and do start listening to them. We have experienced support from companion animal staff for initiatives that would help cats and cat owners, but those staff haven't the authority (and aren't given permission) to pursue them. This is doubtless as frustrating and demoralising for them as it is for us.

It would be reasonable for councils to argue for more funding to support companion animal teams who could work positively with the community, animal welfare and conservation groups to develop local initiatives that support people, pets and the environment. However, arguing for mandatory cat containment is simply asking to be funded for policing their constituents for compliance with a rule that is socially unjust and not scientifically valid.

Mandated cat containment will cause more harm than good, to cats and to people. All council staff would be doing is compliance monitoring, at great financial expense, and with the added costs of moral injury to their staff and the community, including cat owners, carers, pounds, shelters, and veterinarians.

The reasons cat containment won't work are examined in detail and with evidence in the submission of the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation. Cat Protection supports (including financially) the Foundation's vital, groundbreaking research on community cats. It is the first comprehensive research of its kind in Australia, and it is providing an evidence-base for policy. We don't wish to waste the Committee's time by re-stating the submission of the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation; we agree with their contention that cat containment won't work, that we need to take a One Welfare approach, and that high intensity cat desexing initiatives and community cat programs have the capacity to genuinely make a positive difference to managing cat populations.

We note the excellent points made in many submissions, including those from WIRES, the Australian Veterinary Association, and NSW RSPCA.

Rather than reiterate these (solidly referenced) arguments, we would like to highlight that there exists, now, a capacity for councils and the NSW Government to build and deliver better outcomes for people, pets and the environment.

Over the past couple of years, there's been a great deal of work done investigating animal welfare policies and practices – including detailed and thoughtful reports produced by recent inquiries of Legislative Council committees, notably on pounds in NSW, and the veterinary workforce shortage; and the draft CIE report on Rehoming of Companion Animals prepared for the Office of Local Government.

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation publishes updates on its [Community Cat Program News](#) which also highlights research that has been published in peer reviewed journals. Cat Protection has commissioned Ipsos to research cat welfare in NSW, with the 2023 report comparing findings with previous surveys.

This body of work is rich with information to guide policy development; the inquiry into pounds [Report](#) provide an excellent starting point, which recommends among other things, funding for large scale targeted desexing programs, review of the need for community cats to be registered to an individual, clarifying the legal status of TNR programs, and enhancing and standardising pound data.

Current pound data reported is limited in its usefulness, particularly in relation to cats. According to the annual pound information published on the OLG website [Pound and Dog Attack Statistics - Office of Local Government NSW](#), in 2023-24 a grand total of three cats were received by Inner West Council; likewise, Liverpool City Council received three cats. These numbers are meaningless.

We know that many councils don't even record calls about cats, claiming that they have no capacity to do anything about wandering cats, so they don't need to record or report such calls because they aren't actionable.

As a part of the DIVA program, Cat Protection sought information from councils to assist us to target areas of need. We created a data sheet for those councils to collect cat-related inquiry data if they were unable to make changes to their existing CRM systems. None has implemented the data collection sheet or incorporated data capture into existing systems. In the absence of inquiry data (and in the case of councils who refuse to accept stray cats, an absence of pound admission data), what do councils know about cats? Do they prefer to *not know* about cats?

For our programs we've relied on word-of-mouth and the local knowledge and experience of the tireless community cat carers who fill the void left by their councils. We are doing what we can to map areas of need and develop useful data.

To reduce populations of homeless cats it is obvious they must be desexed but, as noted by the inquiry into pounds, the need for registration presents a barrier. We have sought for this to be removed, even just as an exemption for the DIVA Cats program, but this has not been granted. There are cats whose carers would have had them desexed under the DIVA program were it not for this barrier.

A year ago, I gave evidence to the pound inquiry, noting that we welcomed the grant from the NSW Government for DIVA, but that our capacity to deliver it was severely hampered by both the veterinary workforce shortage and the incapacity to desex cats unless they would be registered to an individual person. If we could register the cats to the program it would assist with monitoring and measuring impact, and desex more cats.

A year ago, I said the law demands that cats be allowed to breed; that councils won't take them in; and that most councils don't even record data about cats. A year later, nothing has changed, including the reproductive capacity of cats. An undesexed female might have had three litters in this time.

Ignoring the issue won't make it go away; it makes the problem worse. To the degree that feline population growth has been contained, DIVA has surely helped, and we can thank charities like ours (most of our work is funded by donations and bequests), independent (unfunded) cat carers and rescues, veterinarians who do surgeries at a financial loss to themselves, and members of the community who adopt stray cats. To some extent, we can thank some councils.

It's beyond distressing that we have at hand the means to do something about feline population growth, and action as simple as waiving the need for registration would make a

huge and positive impact. Instead, community cat carers who invest their own time and money risk or incur penalties for simply trying to improve animal welfare.

Most cat owners in NSW already desex their cats (90%) and keep them indoors-only (42%) or with contained outdoor access (9%) and a further 25% are curfewed indoors overnight ([Ipsos Cat Welfare Survey 2023](#)).

Making confinement mandatory is socially unjust and will have negative impacts on feline welfare and human welfare and will not achieve the outcomes desired. With effort, using evidence-based practices and working collaboratively, there exists now a capacity to improve feline welfare and environmental protection. That capacity would benefit from useful data; from increased funding – not only to councils (and not for policing their residents) but also to conservation groups, animal welfare organisations, and community services (which include the soon-to-be defunded Community Justice Centres). Community-based human services play a strategic role in a One Welfare approach to managing cat populations. Waiving the registration requirement (or allowing cats to be registered to a program) and financial support for intensive desexing programs will have an immediate impact.

To offer some optimistic news, we'd like to share some of the feedback from our DIVA Cats clients, who've reported positive outcomes for cats and indeed for themselves:

- “Since the DIVA program has entered my life and all those cats I've rescued / rehomed / kept it's been so much less stressful, less emotional and of course less financial strain ... I hope this program keeps going as there are so many that still need our help.”
- “We have had success in stopping the explosion of cats which had grown from 4 to 40 in a matter of a year.”
- “In the short period of time when I began using this amazing program there has definitely been an improvement in the area I've been focusing on. I'm not feeling depressed and overwhelmed knowing you're supporting me to get this area under control. I truly can't explain how run down, discouraged and frustrated I was ...having them desexed and chipped has helped me confidently home cats ... I've definitely seen less kittens in these areas ...”
- “CPS really has helped in so many ways, I don't know if you all realise but some of us can't stop doing what we do, seeing them suffering causes pain in our hearts and minds which affects our daily lives ... thank you for your support, patience and dedication helping these sweethearts get healthy and hopefully as much as possible homes”
- “... the DIVA program has literally saved their [the cats'] lives and our sanity ... your program has prevented the birth of 30-40 kittens from this one small group. When those numbers are expanded to encompass just Sydney west, it is a terrifying statistic with suffering on an unimaginable scale. The kindness and compassion shown by your staff, along with the practical advice has been of immense emotional support to us and the financial assistance has meant we could actually achieve the desexing, rehoming and stabilising of this group.”
- “We've had 9 cats benefit from your program ... glad to say no more breeding is happening.”
- “About 20 cats seemed to think my place was safe for them and their little ones ...Being on a pension I really could not afford [to look after them] ... I had paid for some to be desexed at a cost of \$120 each but I could not afford to keep doing this ... Your program saved these animals and my sanity ... I think your program is much needed and super successful.”

DIVA Cats has highlighted to us the incredibly valuable role played by individuals and small/informal rescues, at their own expense and in their own time, in helping to manage feline welfare in the community. Cat Protection takes this opportunity to sincerely thank them for their outstanding efforts.

We thank the NSW Government for the grant that allowed us to develop the DIVA Cats program. We hope that we will find means to fund it beyond the grant period, and that cats do not have to be registered to be desexed. And we thank all our supporters who help us to assist thousands of cats, and the people who love them, every year.

Thank you to the Committee for your time and consideration.

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