

**Submission
No 134**

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

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My name is Sandra Hodgins, Veterinarian and owner of Summer Hill Village Vet. I've worked as a vet for 27 years. I spent 13 of those years doing shelter medicine at Renbury Farm which housed the Pound for 4 councils between 2000 and 2013. I have also worked with rescue organisations in my own clinic from 2008 until present. I am on the Board of Maggie's Rescue and have been working with this particular organisation for the past 11 years.

I will list my feedback in bullet points.

- Cat management issues vary extremely depending on the area involved. When I worked at Renbury Farm who serviced the Pounds at the time for Liverpool, Camden, Fairfield and Bankstown Councils we had a massive problem with feral cats in addition to the many lost and un-microchipped cats. Now working in the Inner West of Sydney (at Summer Hill Village Vet) I see a lot more "community" cats – probably previously lost strays who now fend for themselves, or cats breeding in the area who are fed by well-meaning members of public.
- In my opinion the feral cats I used to see at Renbury were almost certainly predated on wildlife and impossible to consider rehabilitating and rehoming. In contrast I see a lot of the "community" cats in the inner west being well fed by community members, predated less and some proportions of these cats are suitable for rehabilitation and rehoming.
- I work with several unofficial community groups who trap, neuter and release these cats back into their colonies and continue to feed them. Many of these people will catch or trap sick animals and bring them to us for care and sometimes euthanasia on humane grounds. Many of these people fund this from their own money. For others these services are heavily discounted or provided by myself at no charge.
- I use these desexing opportunities to help train veterinary students under my direct supervision to improve their surgical skills. It is an invaluable learning opportunity for them and an important community service. For me it is a huge financial burden as when I supervise a student who takes 5 times as long as myself to do a procedure, I am losing money where I could have been seeing paying clients. It always makes me wonder if the university is doing this for the students or is it just me?
- I work with Wires and Sydney Wildlife as well as domestic animal rescue organisations. A massive number of wild animals we see brought in to the clinic are victims of cat attacks. Ringtail possums feature highly in this group, as well as many birds and lizards.
- **The Companion Animal Act has massive holes in it relating to cat management that allows most councils to completely abdicate responsibility, leaving the burden on private practitioners and local rescues who have ZERO authority to operate under the Act. I will list the most common issues I have come across personally in bullet points:**
 - I have had incredible difficulties dealing with our local council at Summer Hill Village Vet (previously Ashfield Council, now Inner West Council). When I

worked at Austral vet from 2000-2013 and we had “stray” cats brought in, we had an amazing relationship with Renbury Farm (where I also attended as the treating veterinarian) and worked together to solve the issues.

For example, if a lost cat was presented to Austral Vet, if it was friendly and we could not contact the legal owner via it’s microchip details, Renbury Farm would either collect the cat and impound it for 2 weeks upon which time it could be rehomed. OR they would “impound it” on paper and leave it with us to care for...in this way the legal owner had every opportunity to contact the pound who now had a record of their lost cat and where it was. The pound also did not bear the burden of having to house and feed it, and if the owner did not claim it in the designated two weeks we were then legally allowed to rehome it, with Renbury Farm being authorised to change the microchip details to the new owner.

In comparison when we deal with Inner West Council...if a member of public brings in a lost cat to Summer Hill Village Vet and we cannot contact the owner via their microchip details, nothing happens. Imagine my position at the vet...I have a kind person standing in front of me who has gone to the trouble of bringing the cat in a box, has been told in most cases BY INNERWEST COUNCIL to bring the cat to their nearest vet, then the vet says yes it has a chip, no I cannot contact the owner, the cat is now your problem, “goodbye”. Our council WILL NOT collect microchipped cats as they are “allowed to roam”, even if the cat is kilometres from their microchipped address. In some cases, the members of public get abusive to us, they slander us on social media for being heartless, they often dump the cat box and walk out leaving it at the clinic.

I know your next question is going to be, “why don’t you just take the cat and sort it out?”. Here is what happens. If I keep the cat and cannot locate the owner, I cannot rehome the cat as it is microchipped in somebody else’s name. If I call the council after 2 weeks I have been advised on numerous occasions by them that I have “illegally impounded the cat” and it is my problem. What can I possibly do in this situation??

- I have taken in cats at Summer Hill after they have been brought to me by concerned members of the public, advised by the finder that they have been living in their yard, catching birds and lizards, and no owner can be found. They are legally allowed to do this under Section 32 part 1 of the Act ((1) Any person may lawfully seize a cat if that action is reasonable and necessary for the protection of any person or animal (other than vermin) from injury or death.)

When I have then contacted Inner West Council to have it collected (as set out in Section 63A part 1 of the Act (1) If a seized animal that is detained at approved premises is not claimed after the period of 72 hours following the delivery of the animal to the approved premises, the person in charge of the premises must cause the animal to be delivered to a council pound.) I have been told that I have “illegally” impounded the cat because their ranger did not observe the

predation. There is nothing in the Act about who must observe the predation. Why can't a statutory declaration or the opinion of a qualified vet be sufficient? There is literally no practical way a ranger is going to happen to notice the comings and goings of a self-sufficient cat, unlike a person gazing out their own window at all hours of the day who hears the birds squawking and sees the pile of feathers the cat leaves. This is utter madness and another example of abdication of responsibility.

- It states in the Companion Animal Act that a person can bring a cat to a vet because it is an "approved premises" but the vet must deliver it to the pound within 72 hours. Every time this happens to us the Council tells us they will NOT accept the cat and it is "our problem". Even if the person who brings the cat has unlawfully seized it, since when is it MY job to determine that? Surely it is the job of the Council who are enforcing the law and they need to sort it out themselves? They cannot tell members of public to bring these animals to us constantly then refuse to take on any responsibility. How can they tell a person to bring me the cat, then say "no returns" when it gets dumped with me? It's ridiculous. They are literally putting me in a position where I am breaking the law by making it impossible to deliver the cat to a council pound. They initially refused to give me the physical address of the pound so I could not personally deliver any cats. Once I eventually found out the address, the Pound Contractor will not accept an animal NOT okayed by the Copuncil.
- The Office of Local Government will advise us vets on unique situations where there is a problem with a microchip, but unfortunately the Inner west Council refuses to follow the advice I receive from the OLG. I am sure they are not the only council, but they are the one I have direct experience with regularly. An example is a situation where the local rescue was called to a Housing Commission flat where the occupant had moved out and left their cat in the premises. The woman who was the occupant and registered owner had abandoned the animal and gone back on to the streets as a mentally unwell homeless person. The rescue organisation was happy to rehome the cat, but the owner was not contactable to sign a "change of owner" form. The OLG advised me that the rescue needed to outline the case in a statutory declaration and submit it to the council who could then legally change the microchip details after they did their due diligence. Inner West Council refused to do this, they refused to impound the cat and they refused to offer an alternate solution. I can confirm that the Rescue Volunteer eventually had a nervous breakdown because of this case and resigned from her job. She has not worked in the industry since. In the end I had to take the cat to another council area, register the cat in my own name using a stat dec as advised by the OLG, then sign a change of owner form to the adopter from Inner West Council area who eventually took the cat. This process took months instead of a fortnight and caused irreparable damage to the rescue organisation. I should also point out...why did the Housing Commission, a Government Organisation see fit to contact a local rescue instead of the

actual legal government body responsible for the Management of Cats??
Complete abdication of responsibility. I would not be surprised if the Council DIRECTED the Housing Commission to contact the rescue organisation.

- If lost cats are not impounded in SOME way, how can their owners find them?
At present the council advises members of public to bring the cat to the vet to scan for a microchip. If the microchip is not up to date with details or we cannot contact the owner we then have to advise them to take the cat home again and “put up fliers”. Even if the council will not house the cats until they find their owners, they should AT LEAST register them as potentially lost so that an owner looking for a cat has a central place to call and report their details. It’s roulette at the moment with fliers and random facebook posts and people are very lucky if they find their pets. There needs to be an actual process to follow, just like with dogs. Using the excuse that “cats can roam” just abdicates responsibility and contributes the ever-growing population of free roaming cats killing wildlife, reproducing, getting sick, getting injured and suffering.

- I had a family dump an animal in our waiting room advising that the owner was in jail, they were his family and we could deal with the animal. They left without signing anything or giving their details. The council would not collect the animal as it was “abandoned”. The RSPCA would not collect it as it was not injured. Again, it had a microchip registered in the person’s name who was in jail, what can I legally do with this animal? Again?? I eventually dropped it to the RSPCA and walked away myself.

- I can give you many examples of abandoned cats where nobody will take responsibility and there is NO PROVISION for these animals in the Companion Animal Act (unless you interpret Section 32 part 1 in a particular way...(1) Any person may lawfully seize a cat if that action is reasonable and necessary for the protection of any person or animal (other than vermin) from injury or death.) If you interpreted this in a way that you need to protect the actual CAT from injury or death, then the Act would cover it. As this point is under the heading **32 Action to protect persons and animals against cats** it is not interpreted this way.
An example of a distressing situation of abandoned cats occurred when a member of public called us to advise that her neighbours had moved out, leaving a mother cat and six kittens in the house. The Council advised her to call the RSPCA, they advised her to call the Council, the Council then advised her to bring the cats to US. When she couldn’t do this (elderly and could not drive) the Council then advised her to call the real estate. The Real Estate advised her to call Pest Control. As we have no legal standing to enter somebody’s premises to remove cats I obviously did not send my staff to do this. In the end a local rescue sent a volunteer to collect them. Just confirming that TWO legally entitled organisations abdicated responsibility for these animals leaving a VOLUNTEER

in a position where they had to trespass and rescue a family of cats from starvation and neglect. They then had the same situation of the mother being microchipped in another person's name!!

- I do not understand why people must keep their dog's registration up to date or they receive a fine, but it's not the case with cats? It is not even compulsory in the details of the Act that cats are microchipped...it advises that "a collar and tag" is sufficient form of identification (Part 4, Section 29 (2) a). As a veterinary practitioner I will certify that this IS NOT a suitable form of identification for a cat: if it is a collar that cannot be undone it is dangerous for the cat and not recommended (happy to give you a history of injuries I've seen on cats including death or loss of limbs) or the collar is a "quick release" which means it immediately falls off if it gets caught anywhere, rendering the cat unidentifiable. Identification for cats MUST be a microchip.
- When we have cars that are registered and their ownership is not documented correctly by change of ownership, the person who the car is registered to is fined. We have SO MANY cats who are "rehomed", their microchip is not up to date and their new owners are never found. I think it should be made a punishable offence to NOT lodge the change of ownership immediately if you rehome an animal. This is the only way to hold anybody accountable for this problem. This problem is MASSIVE. It cannot be the responsibility of the adopter to change it over.

Thank you for reading. Please feel free to contact me at any time for further information or clarification as needed.

Kind regards, Dr Sandra Hodgins BVSc (hons) V8564
Superintendent and Senior Veterinarian Summer Hill Village Vet
(also current Chairperson Maggie's Rescue)