

**Submission
No 172**

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

Organisation: Blacktown City Council

Date Received: 21 November 2024



21 November 2024

The Hon. Emma Hurst MLC
Chairperson
NSW Parliamentary Inquiry in Management of Cat Populations in NSW
Animal Welfare Committee

Dear Chairperson,

Subject: Response to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales

On behalf of Blacktown City Council, I would like to offer input on the key aspects of the Terms of Reference of the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry in management of cat populations in NSW. Blacktown City Council is the largest Council in New South Wales and services a community of over four hundred thousand residents. Blacktown City Council has responded to the need to invest in companion animal management and has developed a state-of-the-art facility to provide refuge for residents' animals, and have offered to provide our services to five other Councils. We therefore are the primary impounding facility for New South Wales. As the primary impounding facility in NSW, Blacktown City Council acknowledges the significance of this inquiry and its potential to enhance cat welfare standards across the state and believe that our recommendations below should be considered of primary importance in matters pertaining to companion animal management and legislation.

To summarise our submission; uncontained and roaming cats service no purpose except to cause havoc within the community and to fragile native fauna. Blacktown City Council will embrace the forward-thinking legislative changes from this Inquiry.

Sincerely

Rosalie Horton
Senior Coordinator
Blacktown Animal Rehoming Centre (BARC)

Terms of reference	Our recommendations/comments
<p>(a) the impact of cats on threatened native animals in metropolitan and regional settings</p>	<p>We recommend amending the <i>Companion Animals Act</i> to prevent cats from roaming i.e. 24-hour cat curfew across NSW.</p> <p>The amendment should restrict cats in the same way that companion dogs are; they must not leave the registered owner's property. In particular Section 30: Cats prohibited in some public places. The amendment will be to eliminate the sanction for cats to roam, thus reducing predation on threatened native animals.</p> <p>The Invasive Species Council reports that domestic cats alone kill an estimated 75 million native animals across Australia every night. Research has shown that roaming cats contribute to the loss of native wildlife and roaming cats serve no positive impacts to the community. In metropolitan areas, residents are regularly distressed by the frequency of cats on their property causing a nuisance. In addition, the welfare of the cat itself is compromised due to the significantly higher risk of illness, injury and death.</p> <p>A search of relevant databases and literature identified a potential 45 threatened or migratory species in the locality, including 7 threatened flora species and 38 threatened fauna species (1 frog, 26 birds, 9 microbats, 1 megabat and a gastropod species) in the locality.</p> <p>Land clearing for the purposes of housing developments has brought human settlements which have in turn brought companion animals including the domestic cat. Legally free roaming cats in our urban environment regularly predate on the vertebrates in the area, including any remaining threatened species.</p> <p>Without appropriate legislation to prevent this impact, this situation will be ongoing. One may even suggest that it is the lack of cat control legislation that is a direct cause of this impact.</p> <p>In conclusion, uncontained cats service no purpose except to cause havoc within the community and to the fragile native fauna. Blacktown City Council will embrace the forward-thinking legislative changes from this Inquiry that have been lacking until now.</p>
<p>(b) the effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers</p>	<p>We again recommend amending the <i>Companion Animals Act</i> to prevent cats from roaming i.e. 24-hour cat curfew across NSW.</p> <p>We also recommend proving funding to councils to give owners access to construct cat containment.</p> <p>Cat curfews have been shown to be effective and therefore should be supported state-wide to allow for effective cat management and a clear instruction for responsible cat ownership. By mandating the restriction, through the Companion Animals Act, it will have a significant impact on urban cat management in the future.</p> <p>Currently, it is estimated that there are around half a million cats living as semi-owned, unowned or feral cats in NSW, largely due to inadequate cat management. The cat over-population could be attributed to the gap in the Act that allows cats to roam. The Act mandates that dogs be confined to the boundaries of its owner's property and it is clear from the volume and impact of unrestricted cats, that it is now necessary to apply the same restrictions to cats.</p> <p>With feline behaviour experts expressing that cat welfare is not impaired by an entirely indoor lifestyle, the only potential barrier is the lack of</p>

	<p>governance. Without legislation to enforce, there will be no incentive for cat owners to comply.</p> <p>The potential barrier is the financial constraints on an owner to construct cat containment. We would recommend that funding is provided to councils to subsidise and endorse containment providers (such as 'Catmax' and 'Catnets'). Using the resources already created with RSPCA's 'Keeping Cats Safe at Home' can assist with the public awareness campaign and eliminate this as a potential barrier.</p>
<p>(c) welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions</p>	<p>We recommend councils or other animal welfare entities be provided with funding for large scale incentive programs including desexing, microchipping, registration and subsidised cat containment initiatives.</p> <p>We recommend an amnesty period for impounding cats while the community adapts to the newly legislated urban cat management strategy. We recommend a state-wide public awareness campaign about the 4 categories of cats and a 24-hour containment scheme.</p> <hr/> <p>Containing cats will target 3 of the 4 cat reference categories which are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Owned cats 2. Semi-owned cats 3. Unowned 4. Feral cats <p>Owned, semi-owned and unowned cats are variably dependent on humans for food and shelter. They are more abundant in areas where food resources are available.</p> <p>Semi-owned cats are fed intentionally by well-meaning members of the public who do not perceive ownership for the cat.</p> <p>Unowned cats are not intentionally fed but are at least partly dependent on food from humans, e.g. by scavenging from human rubbish.</p> <p>Owned cats and semi-owned cats can be managed by containment. With incentives (free desexing, microchipping, registration and subsidised cat containment netting initiatives) to contain cats, or take ownership of semi owned cats by their feeder, contained cats would all be considered 'owned' cats.</p> <p>The remaining, previously considered 'Semi owned cats', not taken in by their carer/feeder will be able to be addressed as 'un-owned' and managed appropriately, in line with similar local government practices for 'stray dogs'.</p> <p>Outside of Blacktown LGA, we also support the NPWS/Local Land Services Feral Cat Eradication plan for the humane removal of cats in targeted areas of National Parks.</p> <p>Welfare challenges associated with homeless cats in NSW include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Overpopulation: The rapid breeding rate of cats can lead to an overabundance of stray and feral cats, exacerbating the issue of homeless cats. 2. Irresponsible ownership: Cats that are not spayed or neutered, along with those allowed to roam freely, can contribute to unplanned litters and an increase in homeless cats. 3. Lack of awareness: A lack of knowledge about responsible cat ownership and the importance of spaying/neutering further perpetuates the problem. 4. Resource constraints: Local councils and animal welfare organisations may face limitations in implementing comprehensive desexing, adoption and outreach programs.

	<p>5. Injury and death: Cats are prone to being killed on roads, dog and cat attacks and poisoning.</p> <p>These challenges can be address through:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Implementation of extensive and accessible desexing programs for both owned and stray cats. Providing subsidised or free desexing services encourages responsible pet owners to neuter their cats and helps control overpopulation. 2. Public awareness campaigns to inform the community about responsible cat ownership, the significance of desexing, and the consequences of allowing cats to roam freely. 3. The introduction of 24 hour cat containment to address challenges of free-roaming cats In the first instance, it will create a clear distinction between 'owned' cats and 'semi/unowned' cats and true feral cats. The containment will require an education campaign and access for owners for cat containment resources. It will also educate owners that Government has a clear stance on cat management and is addressing the myriad of negative implications of unmanaged cats. <p>The cat 'dusk to dawn' curfew will potentially mitigate populations control, native fauna predation and nuisance cat disturbance, but it serves no purpose other than a perceived 'soft approach'. Cat management in each local government area to incur curfews has been shown to be effective and therefore it should be supported state-wide to allow for effective cat management and a clear instruction for responsible cat ownership.</p> <p>We support curfews, but prefer 24-hour containment to the owner's property. By mandating the restriction through the Companion Animals Act, it will have a significant impact on urban cat management in the future.</p>
<p>(d) the effectiveness of community education programs and responsible pet ownership initiatives</p>	<p>Blacktown City Council commenced Responsible Pet Owner education initiatives in 2013 and employed a fulltime Animal Education Officer from Jan 2015.</p> <p>The program was focused on responsible pet ownership for dogs and cats, microchipping and identification of pets, keeping pets contained and under control, safe interactions around pets, understanding animal behaviour, responsible removal and disposal of pet waste from public spaces, desexing and vaccination, behaviour/training and socialisation of pets, and pets in public places.</p> <p>Since then, our Education Officer has presented educational sessions to over 14,000 adults and children with the City, at local schools, community centres, childcare centres, leisure centres, libraries and universities.</p> <p>Social media was also introduced around 2020. We use Facebook and Instagram as well as our website and print media to promote responsible pet ownership.</p> <p>Animal impounding statistics showed a noticeable decline over the past 10 years. In 2013/14 the number of impounded animals was 4,254 animals (2,208 cats, 2,046 dogs) animals and the intake of animals has steadily declined each year to 2,204 animals (1,311 cats and 893 dogs) in 2023/24. We would like to infer that the impact of the targeted education program was attributed to this decline.</p>
<p>(e) implications for local councils in implementing and enforcing cat containment policies</p>	<p>We recommend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • funding for our 'Cat Task Force' to enforce the proposed amended Act and impound cats outside the boundaries of an owner's property • a State-wide public awareness campaign to promote legislative requirements for urban cat management

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increasing funding for council impounding facilities to address the increase in cat intake which will occur with the proposed legislative changes <p>Under proposed amendments to the Act, cats that are found to be roaming would be collected by a council ranger and/or delegate organisation (e.g. A cat 'task force') and taken to local council pound or, if adequately identified by (compulsory and free) microchip, returned and released to the owner.</p> <p>An infringement notice would be issued upon the cat's second collection during the first year of the amendment, and then every time with increasing penalty in subsequent years.</p> <p>Although as stated above, it is recommended that there be a 6-month amnesty period in conjunction with a State-wide public awareness campaign, which will give cat owners and animal shelters and pounds time to adjust to the changes.</p> <p>With owned cats out of the public areas, it will be possible to identify unowned (or potentially feral) cat colonies. This will allow for adequate management measures for cats living in the community, which could involve Trap/Shelter, Neuter and Return-type of supervised and controlled management as determined by each local council's Animal management plan.</p> <p>We estimate the cost of this program would be about \$1 million/year to adequately resource this project. Therefore, this is only possible with increased funding.</p> <p>This does not include the provision of fully funded or subsidised cat containment resources for owners and/or increased housing, husbandry, veterinary services for the increased intake of cats at our Blacktown Animal Rehoming Centre.</p> <p>Some of that cost, however, could off-set by through impounding release fees, in addition to collecting registration fees on behalf of the Office of Local Government.</p>
<p>(f) the effectiveness and benefits to implementing large scale cat desexing programs</p>	<p>We recommend increased funding for vet clinics participating in 'Urban cat desexing projects'</p> <p>The benefits to implementing an intensive, targeted, large scale cat desexing programs has been proved to be the most effective means to reduce cat population numbers.</p> <p>We would support our Blacktown Animal Rehoming Centre's participation in a large-scale desexing program as part of a wider consortium of veterinary clinics. We would do this via offering the Centre's veterinary clinic and resources to facilitate this.</p> <p>Using the current estimate of \$185 to desex a female cat and \$95 to desex male cats, and the projection of a full day of desexing of 10 animals, one day per week (10 cats per day: \$950 - \$1850 in addition to regular services to impounded animals), this would be at a cost to BCC/BARC which we would require additional funding for.</p>
<p>(g) the impact of potential cat containment measures on the pound system</p>	<p>Our Blacktown Animal Rehoming Centre is the largest impounding facility in NSW. Data collected over the past 10 years, as reported in OLG Statistics annually show an average of 1.9% of cats are reclaimed by their owner.</p> <p>In 2023, we changed our intake policy for stray cats, to align with the conditions stipulated in the Companion Animals Act, which allows cats to roam.</p>

	<p>This change correlates with the opening of our new rehoming facility and updating our animal management strategies for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Getting to Zero’ for the unnecessary euthanasia of healthy cats • improving the veterinary services provided to cats • the overall education of staff to understand the behavioural components of a ‘scared and stressed cat’, which were previously deemed ‘feral’ <p>This resulted in a marked decline in the number of cats incoming and a dramatic reduction in euthanasia.</p> <p>From September 2024, to assist the community and the welfare of cats, we accept female cats and kittens to support the community during the annual ‘kitten season’. We have created a robust ‘foster care’ system to care for neonates and to rehabilitate the cat to improve sociability and thus adoptability.</p> <p>Using Prof. J. Rand’s estimation of 3-26.5% of adult Australians may feed a semi-owned cat daily or less frequently (Rand 2022), a proportion of these cats could become owned cats under the proposed strategy this could equate an increase of 100-200%. This would have a significant impact to the cost of managing these animals at BARC</p>
<p>(h) the outcomes of similar policies on cat containment in other Australian states or territories</p>	<p>From 1 May 2024, 39 of Victoria’s 79 councils adopted strict cat containment regulations, such as Cat Curfews (Greater Dandenong, Port Philip) and containments (Indigo Shire, Bass Coast Shire, Greater Bendigo) and some enforce that cats must be desexed and a 24-hour containment (Swan Hill, Wellington Shire).</p> <p>Using these examples as a model for NSW would be a widely acceptable solution.</p>
<p>(i) options for reducing the feral cat population</p>	<p>We recommend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • allowing councils to address ‘semi owned cats’ as an initiative for people to take ownership of cats under a scheme of free ‘Responsible cat ownership - Desex, microchip, register’. • allowing councils to collect ‘unowned cats’ as part of a ‘stray cat initiative’ • allowing NPWS to eradicate humanly cats considered feral from protected areas <p>Using Prof. J. Rand’s categorisation of different types of cats, from our assessment, there are no ‘true feral’ cats in Blacktown City. The cats that require our attention are classed as ‘Semi-owned’ and ‘Unowned’, which are cats reliant on humans either direct feeding or refuse scavenging respectively.</p> <p>We are therefore not involved in the trap and abatement programs of feral cats; however, we do support a humane and respectful cat management program.</p> <p>For the ‘Semi owned’ and ‘Unowned’ cats, our Blacktown Animal Rehoming Centre has undertaken a pilot study for ‘Trap, neuter and rehome’ projects in the city.</p> <p>Of these, we find that we triage the sick and highly stressed/aggressive to be assessed as ‘unsuitable for rehoming’ and humanely euthanise. The remaining that have treatable illness and are sociable, we provide veterinary treatment, desex, house, rehabilitate and rehome them at our own expense.</p>

<p>(j) any other related matters.</p>	<p>Blacktown City Council receives a multitude of calls from the community asking for assistance to alleviate the issues of nuisance cats. Examples of these calls include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• a vacant house with abandoned cats inside,• 'cat hoarder' premises that is offensive to residents,• people feeding stray cats,• nuisance cat disturbances such as cats fighting, defecating on private property. <p>We are often caught in an impasse with the RSPCA/AWL informing people that cats are a 'council issue', whereas councils have limited powers are to regulate the issue.</p> <p>Understandably, the community is frustrated with the lack of clear guidelines when it comes to urban can management. We welcome this inquiry to give Council and animal welfare organisations the correct protocol.</p>
---------------------------------------	---

Appendix

Blacktown City Council Pound Seizure Statistics

Cat intake vs. reclaim rate and euthanasia rate

Year	Cat Intake	Reclaimed by Owner	Percentage %	Euthanased	Percentage %
2013/14	2208	37	1.6	1410	64%
2014/15	2074	39	1.8	1105	53%
2015/16	2562	46	1.7	943	37%
2016/17	1575	4	0.2	627	40%
2017/18	2205	38	1.7	876	40%
2018/19	2437	35	1.4	965	40%
2019/20	1906	39	2.0	634	33%
2020/21	1599	34	2.1	639	40%
2021/22	768	11	1.4	93	12%
2022/23	798	28	3.5	95	12%
2023/24	893	13	1.4	188	21%

Blacktown City Council Impounding Dog and Cat Intake Data:

Year	Dog Intake	Cat Intake
2011/12	2704	2745
2012/13	2749	2231
2013/14	2046	2208
2014/15	2037	2074
2015/16	2265	2562
2016/17	854	1575
2017/18	1450	2205
2018/19	1493	2437
2019/20	1103	1906
2020/21	926	1599
2021/22	841	768
2022/23	1211	798
2023/24	1311	893

References

Rand, J (2002) Targeted high-intensity cat neutering rapidly decreases shelter euthanasia of cats
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1098612X221128767>

RSPCA 'Keeping cats safe at home' Source: <https://www.rspcansw.org.au/keeping-cats-safe/>

Accessed 1 Nov 2024