

Submission
No 274

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Tamworth Regional Council

Date Received: 22 November 2024

Parliament of New South Wales
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

EMAIL:
portfoliocommittee8@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Ref: Ir/GV Document Set ID 2446626

On behalf of Tamworth Regional Council, please find **attached** Council's submission into the Legislative Assembly Inquiry into Cat Populations in New South Wales.

Council would welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee, if invited.

Yours faithfully

Gina Vereker
Director – Liveable Communities

Contact: Gina Vereker

22 November 2024

Response to Terms of Reference – Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales

In response to the Terms of Reference Tamworth Regional Council appreciates the opportunity to bring the below to your attention.

(a) the impact of cats on threatened native animals in metropolitan and regional settings

Council is aware of significant statistics based on research across Australia detailing the negative impacts of cats, including domestic (pet) cats on native wildlife. Council holds significant concerns regarding the impact on biodiversity of the huge numbers of native birds, small mammals and reptiles that are killed by domestic cats each year and the effect on vulnerable and threatened species.

The current regulations applicable to domestic (pet) cats under the Companion Animals Act are inadequate to address this problem, and there is an urgent need to address in particular the lack of a mandate for the desexing of all cats and the requirement for containment within an owner's property, either within a dwelling or within an outside enclosure. There is also an urgent need to tighten the currently weak regulations and process applying to the breeding of cats and the permit system.

It is acknowledged that the amendments proposed above will not achieve the intent without accompanying state funding to enable enforcement of the changes. In the absence of state funding to enforce desexing and ensure containment through enclosure, the numbers of cats, both owned and stray, will continue to increase, with a corresponding increase in wildlife deaths and reduced biodiversity.

(b) the effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers

- *It is considered that a cat containment policy mandating all cats to be contained within the occupier's dwelling or within an enclosure that is constructed such that birds and other ground dwelling native animals cannot enter that enclosure would be significantly effective in reducing the number of native animals killed.*
- *In order for a cat containment policy to work the below is required:-*
 - *A guideline and/or standard should be produced that outlines the size, dimensions, materials, etc. for a compliant outdoor enclosure as in Council's experience many cat owners who want to do the right thing don't know how to do it.*
 - *To encourage cat owners to comply with the containment mandate there should be the ability to purchase a ready-made enclosure available in different sizes, materials, styles, etc. Options need to be available to suit different size properties i.e., city apartments versus a standard residential block.*
 - *A range of enclosure options should be developed to suit different sections of the community in terms of affordability.*
 - *Guidance and standards should be developed to enable owners to meet the enrichment needs of their cat. Enclosures could be developed to include enrichment opportunities already built-in, including ladders, ropes, shade, weather protection, bedding, etc.*

- Surely the above would provide opportunities/ create a market for private enterprise to respond to the new containment requirements.
- Will these measures work?
 - Yes, “good” people will comply (or have already implemented) the containment measures, however, as with all Companion Animal Act requirements, a proportion of cat owners will not.
 - State Government funding must be made available to enable the lower socio-economic sectors of the community to be able to comply, as well as funding to be made available for foster care, rescue and rehoming organisations to enable compliant enclosures to be provided to their volunteer members.
 - State Government funding will also be necessary to enable enforcement of the new containment mandate. Funding should be directed to RSPCA to be specifically used for this purpose. Without significant funding to ensure compliance, the above changes will only work in respect of the cat owners already committed to it.

(c) welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions

- Welfare outcomes are dependent on the matters described in point (b) above to enable adequate enrichment for contained cats.
- However, welfare outcomes will be significantly enhanced compared to no containment because containment will ensure:-
 - avoidance of road accidents;
 - no risk of attack by dogs, foxes etc,
 - no risk of unexpected litters if the cat being contained is not desexed;
 - no potential for transmission of disease from other cats; and
 - reduced vet bills due to injury, attack or illness.

(d) the effectiveness of community education programs and responsible pet ownership initiatives

- It is absolutely necessary to deliver community education programs in order to change the outcome that we are currently faced with.
- Programs need to be ongoing not just one off i.e., these must be delivered on a repetitive and consistent basis.
- In the Tamworth Regional Council (TRC) experience, responsible pet ownership initiatives have been effective, to the extent that resources have allowed. With additional resources (funding), Council would definitely increase its efforts in this space because it delivers positive outcomes.
- Council has continually spruiked the responsible pet ownership message at every opportunity. In this respect the importance of positive relationships with local media cannot be understated. TRC’s experience is that over time, our consistent delivery of messages of responsible pet ownership has been adopted by our local media outlets and has led to the media creating its own stories repeating that message.
- There is a significant opportunity to improve the outcome for cats (and dogs) by delivering programs to schools. Research clearly indicates that children teach and

influence their parents to make positive change, therefore the development of programs for different school aged children would make a huge difference to reducing the numbers of unwanted cats but also reinforcing the message of why cat containment is important.

Tamworth Regional Council would be happy to implement such a program if it had the resources to do, so, therefore either the state needs to take on that role or appropriate funding should be made available to local government.

- *The success of responsible pet ownership initiatives requires a positive partnership with vet practices so that they are in turn delivering that message to their clients.*

(e) implications for local councils in implementing and enforcing cat containment policies

- *Any implementation program will require a media campaign to support it. Whilst TRC would be open to delivering the campaign it should be the responsibility of the state government to design the program including the consistent messaging required.*
- *Implementing awareness programs on an on-going basis will need state funding if councils are to fully participate.*
- *The enforcement of cat containment by local government is likely unachievable as the majority of cats entering the Pound are not microchipped or registered and the permit system is not effective. Therefore, in order to inspect properties to ensure that cats are being contained, how will councils identify which properties have cats?*
- *Region/ city wide enforcement programs (annual/ biannual) would require at least two additional staff fulltime undertaking containment enforcement on a continuous basis (similar to a swimming pool inspection program but much more difficult because no council consent would exist and GIS won't help).*
- *Depending on the Council and its available resources there would need to be an appropriate period of time to undertake the implementation program and enforcement would not commence until additional resources were provided.*
- *TRC could implement a process whereby any cat adopted from Council's pound would be subject to a pre-adoption site inspection and a requirement for containment.*

(f) the effectiveness and benefits to implementing large scale cat desexing programs

- *Implementing large scale desexing programs over a number of consecutive years is the only way to address the problem. This would be the best use of funding (best bang for buck).*
- *Cat desexing programs need to be supported by legislation mandating the desexing of all cats under the Companion Animals Act.*
- *Desexing of kittens should start at four (4) months of age as kittens come into season from that age;*
- *It is also absolutely necessary to shut down the illegal breeding (kitten farms). We currently have 19 kittens that have been abandoned to our pound.*
- *These programs assist those in the community that are least able to afford it and therefore we would be dealing with the source of a large part of the problem.*

- *We know these programs work - TRC partners with the Animal Welfare League and RSPCA to deliver two desexing programs over three days on an annual basis focused on the neediest sections of our community. In 2024 that resulted in a total of 34 cats either being desexed or booking a date for desexing. We could have easily accommodated at least double or triple the number if more funding was available.*

(g) the impact of potential cat containment measures on the pound system

There would be a range of benefits including:

- *Less strays and abandoned cats delivered to the pound.*
- *Less lost cats being delivered to the pound for Council to try and locate the owner, if they are microchipped, or otherwise rehome the cat to a new owner.*
- *Less injured cats brought to the pound, that should in fact be taken to the vet.*
- *Less litters, therefore less time spent on trying to find foster carers, rehoming/adoption organisations.*
- *Scarce/limited council funds could be being redirected to actions that make a real difference, i.e. desexing programs, media campaigns and education.*

(h) the outcomes of similar policies on cat containment in other Australian states or territories

Not sure of the success or otherwise, but it would likely depend on the ability to fund enforcement.

(i) options for reducing the feral cat population

The Companion Animals Act should be amended to:

- *mandate the desexing of all cats.*
- *mandate cat containment.*
- *Require desexing to commence at four (4) months of age.*
- *Only make reference to the Biosecurity Act in any mention of feral cats. The Companion Animals Act should not include any provisions relating the feral cats, nor should the mandate for rehoming be changed (or watered down) by including exemptions for feral cats. This is appropriately dealt with in the Biosecurity Act.*

The option of trap, neuter, release should not be implemented because it will not solve the issue of feral cats and will certainly continue to impact native wildlife populations.

(j) any other related matters.

- **One size doesn't fit all**

With any proposed changes it must be recognised that a distinction exists between metropolitan, regional and rural Councils. As an example, regional and rural Councils often face greater rehoming challenges due the quantity of animals presenting to pounds and the resources available to rehome those animals. Funding opportunities should reflect this and be made available accordingly.

- **Minimum holding periods**

The minimum holding periods for cats microchipped or not needs to be reconsidered. Any cat entering a Pound will be stressed, frightened, distressed – this results in aggressive behaviour, anxiety, withdrawal and self-harm. It should be clarified that any stray or colony cat should be given the opportunity of being assessed over a period of days in terms of whether it is adoptable. It is too easy to make the assumption that any stray cat is “feral” and therefore can be immediately euthanised.

Summary

The accountability for responsible pet ownership lies with individual owners. There needs to be significant resources provided by the government to ensure that owners meet their commitments. It will be impossible for Council to undertake a cat containment compliance role using the same staff (same staff resources) that are required to look after the abandoned and surrendered animals in their Pounds. The RSPCA needs to be resourced and required under legislation to properly undertake the compliance role both in the metropolitan areas and across the regions.

It is acknowledged that Local Government does have some responsibility for the cat problem. The often-used phrase that Council should focus on “rates, roads and rubbish” however, should in reality be “roads, rates, rubbish and companion animals”. As stated above, it is people i.e., ratepayers who have created and continue to create the problem of unwanted cats and kittens, both stray and feral. Therefore, to a point some of their rates should pay for part of the solution. This is no different to ratepayer funds being used to fund roads, waste management, water and sewer etc.

However, similarly, local government is unable to fully fund its other core responsibilities as mentioned above and therefore the state government provides funding programs to assist in funding these programs, which are seen as core responsibilities and necessary to community health, safety and wellbeing. The situation in relation to funding companion animal responsibilities is no different. If local government is to successfully reduce the problem of cat overpopulation and the impacts this creates, it is imperative that the government provide a range of funding programs to assist Councils to address this problem.