

**Submission
No 176**

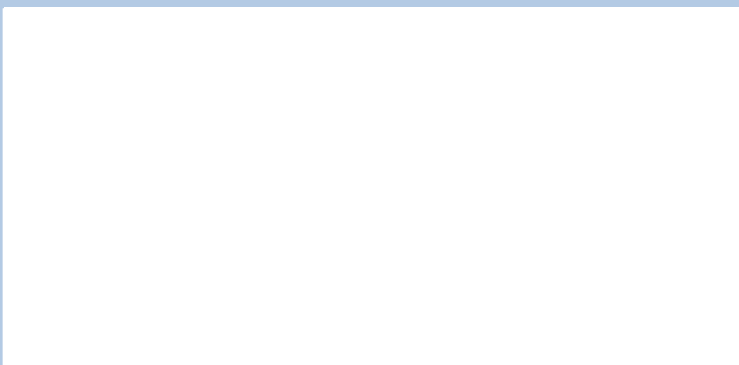
**INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS
IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Shoalhaven City Council

Date Received: 22 November 2024

Management of cat populations in New South Wales

Submission - 22 November 2024



TERMS OF REFERENCE That the Animal Welfare Committee inquire into and report on the management of cat populations in New South Wales.

Introduction

Shoalhaven City Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to provide information to assist with this inquiry and takes the management of cat populations seriously both in relation to protection of wildlife and keeping cats safe at home.

At Council's Ordinary Committee meeting held on 17/7/2023, (MIN23.374) it was resolved to write to Members of Parliament seeking assistance for the Companion Animals Act 1998 to be reviewed so that NSW LGA Councils have the power to formulate a policy to control domestic cats in the Council area with the ability to:

1. Introduce and police new regulations in relation to cat control that are deemed appropriate in their local government area for the protection of native species, the suppression of diseases carried by cats, and for the health and safety of cats generally.
2. Introduce controls on domestic (pet) cats on a trial basis for at least 12 months with a view to eventually introducing a 24-hour curfew.
3. Make 24-hour curfews on cats a condition of consent on all new greenfield development sites.

A ministerial briefing paper outlining the issues that relate to cat containment was submitted to the Hon. Chris Minns, MP dated 22 November 2023.

The research, findings and recommendations in the [Management of Cats by Local Governments in Australia](#) undertaken by the Threatened Species Recovery Hub resulting in a factsheet and a report released in November 2021 summarises many of the issues being addressed here.

The first recommendation is to enable legislation for pet cat management set at the state/territory level, that is harmonised across jurisdictions for all of Australia with a range of mandatory measures including microchipping, registration, desexing, cap on number of cats per household and containment.

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

Feral cats (*Felis catus*) are among the most damaging vertebrate pest species worldwide, and are involved in many extinctions, especially in Australia, New Zealand and other islands. Recognizing and lowering their impacts has a global conservation importance.

Studies throughout the world have demonstrated the impact of free-ranging cats on native fauna. A study in the United State of America, for example, showed that more than 20 billion mammals are killed by cats each year. Translated to Australia, this implies a potentially significant impact of cats on currently widespread small-mammal species. This is the causative rationale for the listing of the predation by feral cats within Australia's Commonwealth Threat Abatement Plan, whereby 36 mammals are listed to be threatened by cats (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008).

Feral cats are highly adaptable and are able to colonise a wide range of habitats and given their arid international origins, are able to survive harsh and dry drought conditions by being able to persist with limited access to drinking water. Feral cats are surplus killers – i.e. they will consume more than they require. This high level of adaptation and predatory functions has enabled them to significantly impact on native vertebrates by

killing those weighing as much as 3 kg (Dickman 1996), but preferentially kill mammals weighing less than 220 g and birds less than 200 g. They also kill and eat reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates (Dickman 1996).

Frank et al. (2014) demonstrated that cats are capable of extirpating small mammals despite their low resident densities within a wildlife sanctuary in Northern Territory. This study assessed the impact of cats on native rodent populations and found a marked difference in the survival and population growth rates of these species between areas that were cat proofed and those that were not. Furthermore, this study showed that only one or two individual cats were sufficient to eradicate local populations of small mammals.

Within the agricultural matrix, feral cats have been found to impact on native fauna occupying forest remnants due to the higher level of fragmentation within these landscapes (Webster et al. 2018).

There are 153 threatened species known to occur in the Shoalhaven local government area (LGA) and of these 107 are threatened fauna. Threatened fauna occupy natural areas within the Shoalhaven LGA and Council manages around 2,000 hectares of Natural Area reserves spread across more than 200 locations. Almost all these reserves are on our urban doorstep and include a variety of habitats comprising bushland, wetland, escarpments, foreshores and dunes that provide suitable habitat for threatened fauna. Accordingly, impacts on threatened fauna occupying the peri-urban interface is often exacerbated due to the increased predation imposed by stray domestic cats, in addition to feral cats.

The cat and related felids are the only definitive hosts for the protozoan parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*, which causes the disease toxoplasmosis. This disease can cause blindness, poor coordination and often sudden death in native mammals and birds, and has contributed to the decline of a remnant, urban population of the eastern barred bandicoot *Perameles gunnii* in Victoria (Lenghaus et al. 1996). A second parasite, the pseudophyllidean tapeworm *Spirometra erinacei*, is carried by all species of introduced carnivores in Australia but is especially prevalent in feral cats. The second intermediate stage of the parasite, the plerocercoid, causes the condition sparganosis in a wide range of vertebrates, and may result in muscular haemorrhage, damage to soft tissues, and eventually death.

More information about the role of feral cats in the transmission of *Toxoplasmosis gondii* can be found in Section J.

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

Effective legislation aims to raise awareness, generate voluntary compliance, and create provisions for local government to take enforcement action when necessary.

Is the legislation to be amended to align with dog laws or is it to be a policy provision allowing each council to develop its own laws? A local policy allows councils to address needs suitable for their environment. However, statewide messaging and regulation can't be consistent like it can with dogs.

The current legislation lacks powers to govern effectively and manage the scope of issues faced by local government about cats. However, legislation alone will not resolve these issues.

Containment and desexing regulations may assist to reduce cat populations, and the spread of diseases such as feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV), ringworm and

toxoplasmosis which affects humans. It could also reduce complaints about nuisance cats and provide for an authorised officer to seize a roaming cat, if it can be caught.

Considerations for a policy include:

- Consider how the policy affects resourcing and the financial cost to council.
- Seek to modify the longstanding culture which accepts cats roaming for a range of reasons.
- How to engage the community, deal with push-back and make the most of community support and feedback if laws were introduced.
- Financial implications, knowledge and time needed for cat owners to manage a contained cat (enclosure, environmental enrichment, kitty-litter solutions, and any health implications and cleaning required for hygiene).
- Care for cats when owners wish to go on holidays are higher if the cat is an indoor/ enclosed cat.
- Identify solutions for neighbours impacted by roaming cats.

(c) Welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions

Welfare outcomes for cats, whether contained or roaming is dependent on the cat owner.

Education and information on caring for a cat is available to cat owners in numerous ways. RSPCA has provided information about [Keeping Cats Safe at Home | RSPCA NSW - RSPCA NSW](#) including [Resources | RSPCA NSW - RSPCA NSW](#).

Pet owners need to be aware of these and other resources so they can help their cats live their best life at home, keeping their cat and our wildlife safe.

Cats in temporary care at Council's animal shelter handle containment without displaying symptoms of stress and appear content.

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

Community sentiment has evolved concurrently with research showing the impact of cats allowed to roam. Education on the benefits of keeping your cat safe at home (cat containment) aims to help with behaviour change.

Education to encourage responsible cat ownership is necessary to complement and reinforce other initiatives to reduce the number of cats roaming, attacking wildlife and breeding. These include data collection to understand the issues, and trapping and desexing programs which target spending based on data, rather than a scattergun approach.

Data collection to track and plot where cats are coming from and to identify owned, semi-owned, unowned or feral cat populations. Trapping can then be targeted rather than the current option which is complaint based and random with no data to support the benefits versus the cost.

Support is needed from State government to develop clear, simple messaging for responsible cat ownership and manage this statewide on behalf of all councils. Councils can then work locally to build on this messaging.

Animal welfare groups provide information about cat health, wellbeing and welfare. Better aligning the agencies who administer the Companion Animals Act and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act would be beneficial for a holistic approach to cat management.

Specific education for breeders (intentional and unintentional) is required, especially if containment laws were to be introduced, which will change how potential pet owners view cat ownership.

Council is one of the ten councils involved in the RSPCA Keeping Cats Safe at Home project concluding in December 2024. Council has been undertaking reduced cost or free desexing and microchipping for some years. As a part of the project, we are also promoting containment and have given away 16 containment kits. It is difficult to provide any data on the benefits of these initiatives to address the problems of native animal protection and any reduction in unwanted cat populations.

Council collects some data but there are knowledge and data gaps which don't allow the scope of the issue to be realised.

- Accuracy of data on the Companion Animals Register.
- How many cats exist in our LGA (feral, semi-owned, unowned, owned and roaming, owned and contained).
- Where are the problem areas to target and what are the issues (financial, care factor - disposable, knowledge, repeat offenders, hoarding, non-compliance with existing regulations).
- What proportion of cat owners have identified, registered and desexed their cats.
- What proportion of cat owners contain their cats.
- How to address low cat reclaim rates at the animal shelter.
- Cat owners tend to wait for a longer period than dog owners to report their cat missing. The explanation is commonly that 'they usually come home after a couple of days'. Dog owners tend to report on the same day.
- Surrender, give-away or abandon cat due to housing rental with no pets allowed or cat unsuitable for owner. Often the animal shelter is at capacity and surrender is not an option.
- How many farmers / rural landowners have non-desexed cats in their sheds?
- How to identify positive outcomes from initiatives implemented?
- What is the vision for further improving responsible cat ownership practices.
- Identify Council's strengths and where compliance is maintained.
- How to manage and resource trapping on public land in identified target areas.
- Low-cost microchipping and desexing initiatives.
- Healthy pet community projects and engagement.
- Community surveys to measure cat ownership practices and beliefs.
- Source community resources to assist eg men's sheds for low-cost cat enclosure solutions. Promote community participation via Citizen Science and [FeralScan](#). Who else in the community can champion the promotion and management of cat enclosures and other initiatives.
- Expanding the purpose of the Office of Local Government NSW Companion Animals Register 'survey of council seizures of cats and dogs' data is one way to capture more information to assist with education and other initiatives eg:

- Number and type of enquiries councils receive about cats.
- Cats entering shelter identified (microchipped) or not, registered or not, desexed or not, length of stay. Shoalhaven City Council will not euthanise healthy cats.
- Animal welfare organisations also collect data which isn't part of this seizure data collection.

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

When legislation is set, it creates more community expectation which then needs to be managed in line with what Council can achieve to resolve complaints. Effective legislation considers cost to councils, ease of enforcement and benefits of outcomes.

If not well thought out, legislation can create many hurdles and obstacles for councils endeavouring to resolve issues, gain compliance and undertake enforcement. Examples of difficulties encountered with the Companion Animals Act:

- Lifetime pet registration mailouts - time taken to administer process and undertake enforcement and pet remains unregistered with fines unpaid. Details of ownership or address may also remain out of date.
- Action to protect persons and animals against cats (s32 Companion Animals Act) does not fully provide for a solution other than to seize or destroy the cat. There is no repercussion for the owner and proof is difficult to obtain.
- What is council's end game for irresponsible cat owners and those who repeat offend.
- Additional staff and training for all staff may be required to manage increased workload.
- Implications for existing budgets which are constantly under review.
- What is the expectation of councils during the evening to manage roaming cats.
- Increased demand on trap usage by public and how to manage trapped cats if the animal shelter is at capacity.
- Obtaining proofs of cat offending is made more difficult if containment is only partial (eg dusk till dawn).
- A definition for 'contained' is required to make it clear that cats must be enclosed and not free to roam where they can attack wildlife, even in their own backyard.
- A definition for 'stray cat' is required to recognise semi-owned or unowned domestic cats.

Containment considerations:

- Ensuring the policies are logical, practical and enforceable.
- Resourcing complaint management, trapping and enforcement.
- Partial containment (dusk to dawn) does not protect native animals during the day.
- Containment within the yard does not protect native animals within the yard.
- Education and support would be required to help cat owners and their cats adapt and understand the reasons why roaming is not good for their cat.

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

National momentum is needed rather than token local level desexing. A preventative strategy rather than a random approach by some councils and welfare groups. Sufficient funding upfront to implement a well thought out, ongoing plan involving all local government areas and relevant agencies would pay more dividends.

There are numerous groups in various sectors including universities, animal welfare organisations and local councils undertaking research and implementing initiatives to reduce roaming cats. Consolidation is needed to collate information, engage the community, create practical solutions and resource implementation.

Council experiences a low uptake on free microchipping and subsidised desexing when offered. This may in part be due to the criteria being a pension or healthcare card which limits pool of applicants. There is disparity for pet owners who do not meet criteria but are experiencing financial hardship. It also does not address the aim of desexing as many cats as possible.

Council collaborates effectively with AWL and RSPCA for desexing programs - the following table highlights a decrease of cats and kittens progressively over the five years. These programs are relatively small, with limited funding, so a large-scale desexing program would see a larger benefit.

Year	Number of cats incoming to Shelter	Number of kittens entering shelter
2020	306	263
2021	336	500
2022	245	181
2023	229	146
2024	191	130

Consideration for cats' welfare and re-education regarding any legislative changes requires careful attention. For example, a clear policy could be established where all cats born after a specific date, such as 1 July 2025, must be desexed unless they are from a registered breeder and must be contained.

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

Restrictions which require effort and cost to cat owners may result in more unwanted cats in the community, especially as they are considered much more disposable than dogs and have notable breeding seasons.

If trapping increases by community members this will result in more cats being taken to animal shelters which are already at capacity, affecting the wellbeing of cats in temporary care. This may also result in an increase in euthanasia impacting on shelter staff health and wellbeing. Will councils be expected to fund and manage more traps and more staff to keep up with demand? Feedback from councils in Victoria indicate there is an increase in resources required.

If more cats enter animal shelters, it follows that there is the challenge of increasing adoption rates.

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

Feedback from one Victorian council who has containment from 7pm to 7am is that they have 75 traps with a waiting list. The expectation from the community for council to act is high. A dedicated officer is needed for cat and dog pickups with the majority being cats. It costs council \$400 per cat with a 30% reclaim rate and high euthanasia rate, placing a burden on the shelter and council. Of the 30% reclaimed, repeat offenders are ongoing with fines not paid. Renters and low socio-economic areas mean that cat owners in these categories have little intention to implement containment measures.

Kingston council has a dusk until dawn cat curfew that is established by an order under Section 25(2) of the (Victorian) Domestic Animals Act 1994. [Cat ownership - City of Kingston](#). More information and some benchmarking of other Victorian councils is in the attached "Cat Confinement Report". Also attached are the results of a recent public consultation on whether Kingston council should remove the mandatory desexing for dogs.



Cat Confinement
Report Dec 2023.pdf



Mandatory desexing
consultation outcome

(i) Options for reducing the feral cat population

Control of feral cats is recognised as one of the most important fauna conservation issues in Australia. Lethal control is the most common form of management, particularly via specifically designed poison baits. This is often challenging in the Natural Areas within the Shoalhaven LGA given their proximity to residential dwellings and the potential for off-target kills. Consequently, tighter controls are required around cat ownership to enable a balanced outcome. i.e. companion animal without compromising threatened species through increased predation pressures.

Council has established a red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) control program to reduce the predation pressures on small to medium sized mammals. A significant amount of research has been carried out on the Mesopredator Release Theory, which highlights that the removal of an apex predator has the potential to lead to the proliferation of smaller predators (mesopredators) and thereby increasing the impact of predation on smaller prey species (Ritchie and Johnson, 2009). Furthermore, mesopredators have the potential to lead to the extinction of some prey, particularly where they have low numbers (Glen and Dickman, 2005), and this is intensified by low fecundity rates. This raises a challenge as the reduction of red fox numbers may lead to increases in feral cat numbers, and as feral cats are difficult to control (Dorph et al. 2023) it raises the importance of responsible cat ownership.

(j) Any other related matters

Toxoplasmosis gondii is zoonotic disease that has been found to occur in an estimated one-third of the human population worldwide (Dubey 2004). Humans become infected with Toxoplasmosis gondii from the consumption of food or water contaminated by faeces from infected felids, consumption of unprepared meat of an infected host, or congenitally through the placenta during pregnancy (Dubey 2010; Jones and Dubey 2010).

A life cycle of *Toxoplasmosis gondii* is presented in Figure 1. Felidae, both domestic and wild, are the definitive hosts of *Toxoplasmosis gondii*, shedding this environmentally resistant oocyst stage in their faeces. Most other warm-blooded animals, including humans, act as intermediate hosts of this disease. Intermediate hosts ingest oocysts from contaminated food, water or soil. The oocysts multiply in the intestinal tract of the intermediate host, forming tachyzoites, that then form cysts in the skeletal or heart muscles, the brain or the liver for the lifespan of the host (Dubey 1998). Infections in healthy humans are asymptomatic or result in an influenza-like illness that may affect immunocompromised patients; then morbidity and mortality commonly occur (Conrad et al. 2005). Tachyzoites can be transmitted via the foetus during early pregnancy, potentially causing foetal death or symptoms such as mental retardation, hearing impairments or vision loss (Conrad et al. 2005). The lifecycle of this disease is completed when cats consume the dormant cysts from the intermediate host, and they are reactivated and eventually shed as oocysts again or sporulated oocysts are consumed from other cats (Dubey 1998).

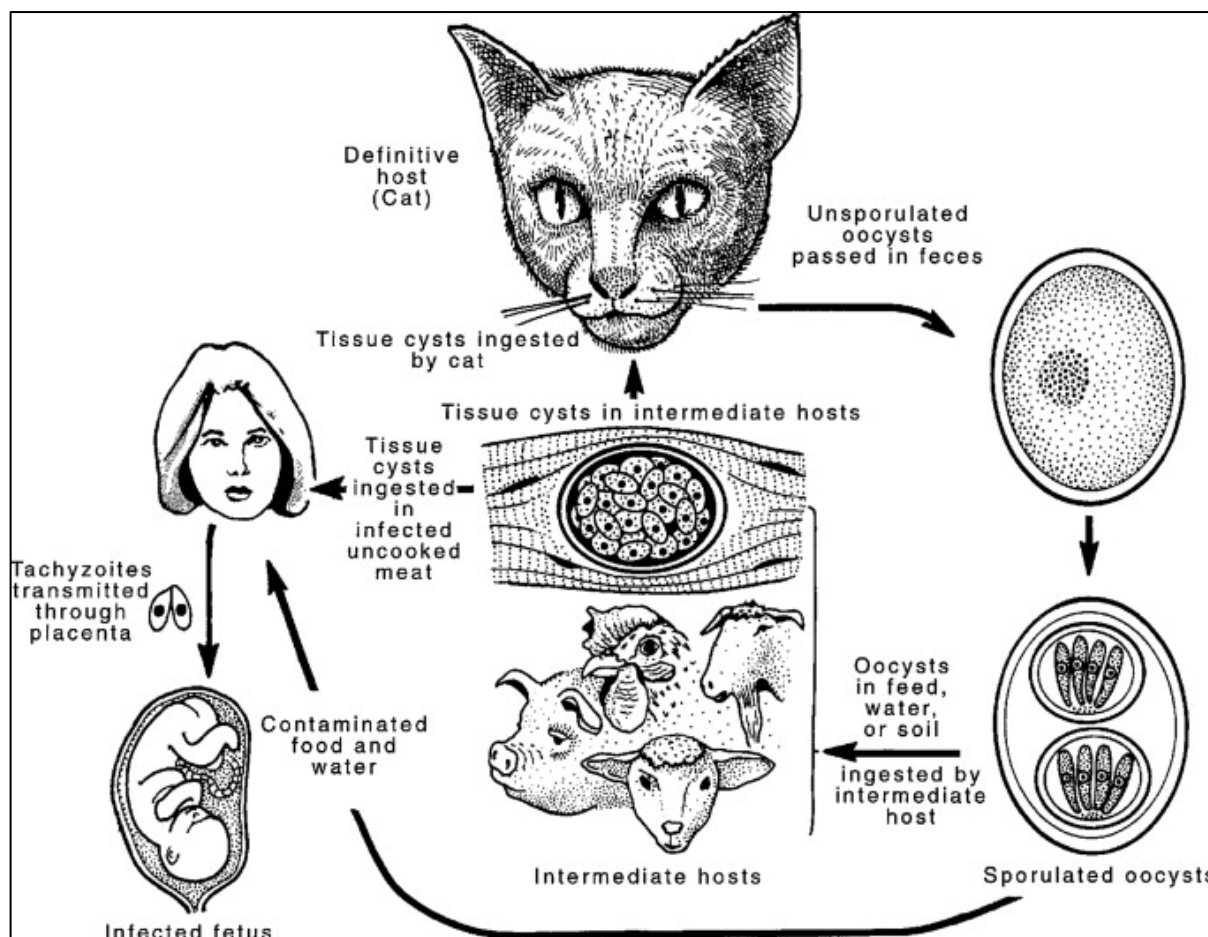


Figure 1 Life cycle of *Toxoplasmosis gondii* illustrating the role of cats as the definitive host of this zoonotic disease (Source: Dubey (2014))

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