

**Submission
No 16**

INQUIRY INTO POUNDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Date Received: 12 August 2023

SUBMISSION TO NSW POUND ENQUIRY

I live in the Blue Mountains where an RSPCA shelter and pound exist - but not for long. RSPCA NSW have recently announced the closure of the shelter (which was built with money raised by the Blue Mountains community) and their intention to cease pound operations. The pound contract they have with Blue Mountains City Council runs till the end of June 2024 but won't be renewed. With such short notice, the Council have little time now to find a solution to this problem.

This particular problem in the Blue Mountains may be unique to the area but the result will be one less pound at a time when all the pounds and shelters are overflowing with animals. Capacity constraints are dire following the influx of Covid lockdown pets into households and the following housing and cost of living crises which have resulted in multi-thousands of abandoned and surrendered animals ending up in pounds.

I am not personally involved in animal rescue but am in frequent contact with people working in some of the volunteer rescue groups who have an intimate knowledge of the workings of the NSW pounds and the current difficulties the pounds and consequently the rescue groups are facing. The information underpinning this submission comes from them. The experiences of the rescue groups are the same. They are desperately trying to accommodate animals from pounds before they have to be killed to make room for new arrivals. The situation is taking a heavy physical and psychological toll of these rescuers because they realise that even taking a break will mean animals will die. These groups are battling space constraints themselves and some are having to rent space in private boarding kennels in order to save a few animals from a certain death. This is an expensive exercise for these volunteer groups which operate on tiny budgets. These dedicated rescuers are having to take the load because councils have inadequate pound capacity and the very wealthy RSPCA is ceasing impounding contracts with councils around NSW, as well as closing shelters.

Flaws in the system

RSPCA not a reliable pound contractor. RSPCA-Council contracts cannot be relied upon as an on-going solution to impounding responsibilities of councils. RSPCA are under no obligation to provide impounding services, as councils are, and will make decisions which best suit the current trajectory of the organisation, which of late appears to have little to do with sheltering the thousands of homeless domestic animals inundating pounds.

Contracting out pound responsibilities. Another problem with the current pound situation which is contributing to this capacity crisis is the inadequacy of regulation that would ensure each council is required to have its own pound facilities. Councils take out impounding contracts with other councils. When situations like the current one occur, council pounds have trouble coping with the animals from their own area, let alone from other council areas. One council e.g. has 4 impounding contracts with other councils as well as their own. This has led to a situation in which some council pounds currently refuse to take surrendered animals, as their contractual obligations with other councils have led to more animals coming in than the pound can cope with, before consideration of the acceptance of surrendered animals.

The financial inducement of impounding contracts available to councils is not conducive to best animal outcomes. Councils may find the extra income from these contracts hard to refuse, and possibly at the time of signing of the contracts, there may have been some available capacity. However, as has been well demonstrated of late, situations can dramatically change and councils

can find themselves over-committed in relation to pound capacity. Some councils have themselves been forced to use private boarding facilities - ultimately an expensive imposition on rate-payers..

The current system is conducive to the dumping of animals. More animals are now being picked up by council rangers. Many animals, apparently having been dumped, are then taken to pounds. There are two main reasons contributing to this situation: One is the high fees charged to surrender an animal. Fees vary but range up to \$500 for a dog and \$400 for a cat. This is out of reach for some pet owners especially during this cost-of-living crisis. Another reason, as mentioned above, is the capacity problem made worse if councils have to honour contracts with other councils and taking surrenders is no longer an option.

There are flow-on effects from this broken pound system. Already large numbers of feral dogs have been reported in our Blue Mountains National Park this year whereas in past years such sightings were a rarity. We can assume the same is occurring with cats but they are often less visible. The impact on the wildlife already devastated by the 2019/20 fires in this World Heritage listed National Park so far can only be assumed - and it won't be limited to this area.

Adequacy of pound facilities, their operation and how they can be improved

Regulations governing surrendered animals are inadequate. At times when pounds aren't overcommitted and are able to take surrendered animals, microchipped animals have to be kept for a certain number of days by the pound before they become the property of council and can be disposed of as they wish. However, unmicrochipped animals that have been surrendered could be put up for adoption or killed the same day. People sometimes surrender animals that aren't their own but they have come by via a variety of means, e.g animals hanging around people's houses for a time and ultimately being surrendered. Someone could pay \$500 to surrender a dog and it could be killed the next day. This is not an acceptable outcome neither for the animal nor the person paying a large sum of money in the hope that the animal will be rehomed.

Animals going through pounds should not be allowed to reproduce. No animal should leave a pound undesexed and all councils should be obliged to run a desexing programme to help with the cost to potential owners. Desexing is expensive and every effort should be made to ensure unwanted litters of puppies and kittens aren't adding to the problem of homeless dogs and cats.

Full vaccination and desexing in pounds before they leave would help rescuers enormously.

Training programmes for new adopters would help to ensure dogs stay with their owners, instead of being surrendered or dumped because of lack of knowledge of how to handle difficult behaviours.

The adequacy of NSW pounds is variable but some are described by rescuers as "shocking". Inadequate shelter provided, inadequate veterinary care, inadequate bedding, infrequent cleaning so that some dogs are covered in faeces. It would seem that sections of the *NSW Animal Welfare Code of Practice No 5 - Dogs and cats in animal boarding establishments* are not being applied to pounds. If the need for these provisions is really animal welfare, then surely the animal's welfare is paramount whether in a pound or private boarding facility. Sections 3.2 Construction of animal housing, Section 3.5 Temperature, Section 3.9 Bedding and Section 4.1 pertaining to Cleaning and Disinfection, 6.3 Veterinary Care and 6.5 Euthanasia all seem to be disregarded in some pounds.

The use of 'drop boxes' by the side of roads in country areas disregards all notions of animal welfare. This barbaric solution to council's impounding problems must simply be banned.

The effect of the pound environment on dogs in particular must be taken into account when decisions about the animal's fate are being made. However, this is not usually the case. Some perfectly rehomable dogs enter the pound system but, by the time their fate is to be decided, their behaviour has changed and they are assessed as being non-rehomable and killed. Their death occurs simply because they don't adapt well to the pound environment. Dogs need to be assessed more than once, especially when they first enter the establishment, and in different environments. They should not be assessed only when the decision is to be made about their fate. Also there should be a regular trainer to visit the pounds to address behavioural issues that could be fixed, rather than the dog being killed for behavioural issues. More mental and physical stimulation should be offered to dogs in pounds which would alleviate some of these problems.

Killing by the rule book. There are reports of animals having been killed in the pounds, even after a rescue group has put a hold on an animal and has arranged a pick-up, simply because the person organised to pick up the animal was a few minutes late. In country areas especially, rescues involve travel of often hundreds of kilometres with all the unforeseen circumstances that can affect arrival times. Once a rescue group has put a hold on an animal, that animal should be safe and a reasonable time limit arranged with both parties to allow that rescue to take place. No animal should be killed without at least a phone call to ascertain why the rescuer hadn't arrived at the designated time.

Underlying problems

Limitations on breeding. The situation which exists at the moment should not have happened. So many homeless animals putting enormous pressure on the pound system and the independent rescue groups could have been avoided if restrictions on the breeding of dogs and cats was not far too loose. It is not only back-yard breeders that are causing the problem. Licensed breeders were allowed to dump so many animals onto the market especially during Covid lockdowns resulting in windfall profits to the breeders but a devastating impact on many of those animals, as well as the non-designer animals in pounds and shelters landing there due to a flooded market. Much stricter restrictions on all breeders are essential and they should include tighter limits on the number of litters dogs in particular are allowed to have - for the dog's wellbeing as well as addressing the larger problem. Dogs used for breeding should not have to endure the distress of giving birth to pups and having them taken away more than once in their lives. Such a restriction would also remove the financial benefit to breeders of dogs being used as breeding machines and many would no doubt exit the business. However, when dogs are in record numbers in pounds and elsewhere and desperately needing adoption, all breeding should cease entirely and significant penalties for breeding enforced.

Backyard breeding. While breeders are meant to be licensed, it was the case especially during lock-downs that backyard breeding of dogs became a licence to print money. A reward for people to turn in backyard breeders could help control this industry operating under the radar. But who is going to police it? RSPCA have claimed that they don't have the resources to properly police backyard breeding. While a check of their financial statements might put that claim into some considerable doubt, there is no doubt that backyard breeding still thrives, even if demand currently may have declined since its peak.

A body, other than the RSPCA and independent of government and financially-linked interest groups, must be established to properly police back-yard breeding and confront the many and varied aspects of animal welfare that our current system is inadequate to deal with, including the pound system.

The changing situation which has shown pound facilities to be seriously inadequate and with the RSPCA discarding its original purpose of sheltering animals at a cost to the organisation in favour of activities which earn money for the organisation, it has been the rescue groups which have had to pick up the slack. Sometimes very small and with very limited resources they are having to bear the burden of this changed environment.

Significant government grants have in recent times gone to the very wealthy RSPCA. How that money was spent should be investigated with the main criterion being effectiveness in providing good animal outcomes. Future government money should be redirected to where it is most needed and where it will be most efficiently spent. A comparison of the number of animals rehomed, 'euthanasia' rates and the cost per animal of sheltering, vet care and rehoming compared to those statistics pertaining to the large animal organisations, especially the RSPCA, will show the rescue groups are far out ahead on each measure. When public money provides these grants the public should be satisfied that their money is going to provide the best outcome for animals while providing best value for money. This has not always been the case.

The crisis in the pound situation may take a long time to fix, but in the meantime, the volunteer rescue groups are trying compensate for the current inadequacies and they need help now.

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12 August 2023