

**Submission
No 20**

INQUIRY INTO POUNDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Happy Paws Haven

Date Received: 14 August 2023

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Monday, 14 August 2023

SUBMISSION: Inquiry into Pounds in new South Wales by Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 8 Customer Service

Thank you for the opportunity to provide submissions about the Inquiry into Pounds in New South Wales. Happy Paws Haven Inc Management Committee is making a submission to address the following issues based on our experience working with both small rural pounds and the larger Sydney based Animal Holding Facilities.

We operate a private no kill animal rescue, rehabilitation and rehoming centre in the Clarence Valley in northern New South Wales which has been in operation since 2006 and has rehomed in excess of 3500 cats and dogs.

Happy Paws Haven (known as HPH) is a registered rehoming organisation with the Office of Local Government (known as OLG), R251000043. Our local council is the Clarence Valley Council (known as CVC). The local pound is the Clarence Valley Council Animal Shelter.

As an acknowledged and successful OLG authorised rehoming organisation, we would like to address the Terms of Reference :

- the relationship between NSW pounds and animal rescue organizations, from our own dealings with CVC and other pounds in NSW.

We have included comments based on our experience and observation:

- factors influencing the number of animals ending up in New South Wales pounds, and strategies for reducing these numbers
- the role and challenges of behavioural assessments in New South Wales pounds and shelters
- the challenges associated with the number of homeless cats living in New South Wales for both pounds and animal rescue organisations, and strategies for addressing this issue

Our Submission:

HPH has for many years striven to establish a working relationship between ourselves and CVC. We have approached the relevant people personally as well as through phone calls, emails and written submissions. However, throughout all of this time there has been a steadfast rejection by the CVC of all of our attempts to form a working relationship. Whether this is because of politics or personalities, the fact remains that HPH has continually made the running, not the CVC.

When a new set of people came into Council we asked for a meeting with the new Acting General Manager and the new Mayor with the set objective of trying to yet again establish a working relationship. HPH has much to offer and for the sake of the welfare of animals and pet owners in our community. We had long decided that working with Council could present many new opportunities for both organisations.

We exist through the dedicated efforts of volunteers and supporters and we receive no funding from any government agency. Yet we have rescued and rehomed over 3500 animals. We are a significant player in animal welfare and we recognise that good outcomes for animals are the result of establishing good relationships between councils and animal welfare organisations.

On 29th June 2022 we met with the Acting General Manager and the Mayor. A lot of time and effort was put into a presentation called 'Happy Paws Haven and Clarence Valley Council Working Relationship' followed up with a document called Happy Paws Haven and Clarence Valley Council Working Relationship Proposal. (A copy of both is attached to this submission).

Despite having been given the meeting time, there has been absolutely no follow up by Council or any effort to suggest that any of the ideas could be employed for the welfare of animals in our area other than a request for us to submit a DA. Going forward, successful strategies for rehoming companion animals and the decreasing of euthanasia rates will depend heavily on the strong relationships that could easily be established between like minded organisations, such as ourselves, whether local government or private. There needs to be a willingness for both parties to work together. Apart from addressing the obvious needs of the animals, a strong partnership could see significant cost savings for both and a significant benefit to the Clarence Valley Community.

Apart from this meeting, our encounters with the Council have largely been punitive. Noise complaints from neighbours are a driver and we have spent significant amounts of money responding to this. We have fenced the total property where the animals are housed to 6-7ft, established trees in the buffer zone next to the fencing to assist with sound absorption. We also installed an additional 70m long fence with a 40ft container 1m from it as a buffer between it and the sound source. There is internal 1m high internal fencing installed to keep dogs away from direct contact with fence lines. We instructed volunteers in ways of calming dogs, hired a dog trainer for enrichment purposes, plus providing other play and enrichment activities.

Yet Council is happy to fine but not to work with us despite our efforts. We need money to stay viable, to care for our animals and to support our community, not to put funds into council coffers.

We have welcomed Rangers and management onto the property to do inspections but have had NO feedback despite constantly requesting inspection reports in person and via by email in regards to the outcomes of these visits. We have also asked for records of when the neighbours have been complaining in order to establish what may have been a trigger to dogs barking. This has not been forthcoming either.

We work with the community and have for example, special needs children visiting for the local schools which on occasion excites for the dogs as does letting them out of the acoustically attenuated cabins each morning. They are also walked by our trainer and others on our large property at the back of the shelter area. When being walked to this location the other dogs will bark initially as they are walked past. We need to know if these are the times when Council receives complaints. Although requested on many occasions has not been forthcoming. Our noise diary has been ignored despite Council specifically requesting that we maintain one.

We are at a loss to understand the lack of forward thinking by our Council when it comes to the increasing problem of rehoming companion animals. This council unlike others we have experienced is known not to be at all proactive when it comes to the wellbeing of companion and working animals. This is a problem that won't go away.

The response of CVC has basically been NOT to respond, just to ignore us. We work with at least 8 other pounds throughout NSW. If they have an animal that is suitable for rehoming but they don't have the room, they contact us. If it is suitable for us and we have the room, we organise a transfer. Win win for the pound in question, HPH and most importantly, the life of the animal that is saved and given a second chance. We are very mindful of our capacity to care, the balance between not only the space required to take in the animal but also the ability to provide the necessary care financially, from a veterinary perspective and that of our volunteer carers.

When the weekend (or after hours) comes around, the pounds are closed. At least people here in the Clarence Valley have somewhere to bring the dog or cat they find abandoned, dumped, or lost as our gates are not closed. The alternative would be to simply ignore the animal or to leave it at the gates of 'closed pound. Here at HPH we are doing the work of the pound, unpaid, simply because we are open 7 days a week. Last weekend 9 5week old puppies were brought to HPH in two rubbish bins, surrendered because they were unwanted and the pound was not open.

As we are a no kill organisation, many people who are forced to surrender their companion animal, for whatever reason, will bring it to HPH knowing that we will strive to find it a home regardless how long that takes. Our society is becoming increasingly aware of the fact that so many animals are euthanised by most pounds and big organisations like the RSPCA and they find it simply unacceptable. This is another reason why as a community we need to work together. These pounds and shelters charge a substantial fee to surrender an animal knowing that it will often be used to euthanise the animal being surrendered.

Holding costs for pounds and shelters can be prohibitive if they choose not to euthanise, or legislation prohibits them, and thus working closely with no kill rehoming organisations becomes a necessity rather than a choice. But rehoming organisations don't run on air and funding will be necessary.

Our experience with other pounds has been predominantly positive, The small rural pounds we have been working with welcome us when we have rehome and appreciate our help. We have built a relationship based on trust and transparency which has made them easy to work with. We communicate regularly and if we have the space work together to make sure the animals are transported safely. We generally use a professional dog transportation company such as dog movers but we have also been known to pick them up ourselves. Often these animals are dogs and they generally have only been microchipped thus it is at our cost to desex and immunise these animals. The some of big city pounds such as Canterbury Bankstown Pound will ensure the animals are desexed and immunised before being transported to us at their cost but most have at least immunised the pet in question.

Our recent experience with the OLG has not been positive either. The intent of their recent competitive companion animal rehoming Grant was to assist rehoming organisations with the costs of daily caring. It was an acknowledgment of the important role that rehoming organisations play in animal welfare. Yet one particular rule of eligibility, in no way associated with the stated goal of financially assisting companion animal rehoming organisations, ruled us ineligible to apply. Throwing the baby out with the bath water is never a particularly great idea but it happened with the ill thought-out rules of the OLG eligibility criteria. All the dedicated volunteers and supporters of HPH, none of whom were ineligible, were ignored because one member (who did offer to resign) was found ineligible.

This is particularly ironic given that the OLG was responsible for the commissioning of the CIE report on the Rehoming of Companion Animals in NSW.

Again, like with the CVC, response to emails was negative without a constant effort on our part to get some answers. What is wrong with communicating with public? It seems almost a government policy at all levels to withhold communication in the hope that it will all go away! Likewise emails to MP Ron Hoenig regarding the matter of the OLG Grant, elicited no response.

Perhaps other rehoming organisations in other local government areas have more positive relationships with their Councils. We however cannot say the same in our regard to our relationship with CVC. What we do know is that the fate of small but significant rehoming organisations that depend on donations or hard-won grants for their very existence, will eventually fold given all the pressures and then there will be no choice but for governing bodies at whatever level to stand up and do something.

This leads to the factors influencing the numbers of animals that end up in pounds.

We believe that the costs of owning an animal, the need for suitable housing for people who are renters, the gradual change in society re the nature and the role of companion animals, the economic conditions at the time and the lack of education of

many owners as to the needs of the particular animal they purchase, all impact on the number of animals in pounds.

Whilst the onus of ongoing costs of care including enrichment plans should be on the potential owner when it comes to purchasing an animal, it is more often an emotive led decision. Then they discover, that, like having children, animals cost money, need to be fed with good quality food, given regular parasite treatments, given medical care as required, receive an education (training and socialisation) and to lead enriching lives. Animal rehoming organisations and pounds have a responsibility to point out the potential on going costs of ownership of the particular animal species proposing to be adopted. They also need to ensure that any adopted animal is desexed, and up to date with vaccinations, chipping, parasite control and so on. Most pounds, shelters and rehoming organisations probably do this but it should be made mandatory!

At this stage there is no guidelines or regulations or a requirement for backyard breeders and puppy farmers to also make sure their animals are desexed prior to rehoming, as an example. They do not seem to think it matters and getting an animal desexed and fully vaccinated, for instance, as this will impact their profit margin. It is here that legislation needs to be in place to ensure that all breeders of animals, other than those registered, are obligated to desex the animals they sell. Otherwise, the problem is simply perpetuated. Most registered breeders ensure the offspring of their breeding pair are desexed and immunised prior to going to pet homes.

For responsible owners who obtain an un-desexed animal, the cost of desexing alone can be prohibitive. Education and encouragement are not going to win over the significant cost of desexing for the owner, so it either has to be done at source eg back yard breeder or at subsidised costs. Along with this requirement there should be an education package available for the community to understand the benefits of desexing their animal prior to the animal's ability to breed and have unwanted litters. That of course will fall to government bodies, but a short-term cost might stop a long-term problem of unwanted offspring animals being dumped, going feral or left at pounds.

Accommodation issues also lead to an increase in animals in pounds and rehoming organisations. Renters often find it difficult to find accommodation that allows pets. Most landlords, often influenced by real estate agents, mandate that pets are not allowed. Resulting in renters not being able to have their much loved pets in a rented property and have difficulty finding suitable accommodation within their budget. They have little choice but to surrender their much-loved pet. Unless the government takes the step of not allowing a 'no pet clause', the problem will continue.

Understandably this is a very difficult thing to do but seems to have been successfully legislated in both Queensland and Victoria. We understand that Landlords have invested significantly in their properties and may well believe that damage will be done no matter how careful the tenant. The interesting issue is that small children are not banned yet often do more damage than any pet. Landlords would also believe that it is their right to choose to whom to rent, at the same time acting on the advice of real estate agents, an argument that is hard to contradict.

Caravan parks have the choice to exclude pets and probably nobody would suggest that they should be obligated to take one and all, large and small. Yet caravan parks are becoming a long-term solution for those who are unable to afford other types of rental housing thus more and more are taking long term renters. Should allowing a pet in a rental be on the basis of pay more? The pet bond has been available as a potential solution for a long time, which most renters are not aware of, and most landlords and real estate agents do not seem to want to implement. In some Airbnb or similar accommodation, for example, where a dog maybe be allowed and an extra charge may apply, no matter how clean and dog hair free the place is left. It is undoubtedly a very thorny issue but with an extremely very large implications for pounds and rehoming organisations. Here at HPH the bulk of our surrenders come from people unable to have, or find, dog(or cat) friendly accommodation.

Obviously economic conditions will have an impact on people's ability to maintain a pet and the decision may be to surrender it.

Behavioural assessments in general are only a tool that provides a snap shot of the animal's behaviour at a certain point of time. The issue facing pounds in particular is that these assessments are often done within a short period of time from the animal's arrival in a strange place with strange and unfriendly smells and sounds. The animal is generally anxious and scared, they have been often removed from a loving environment. This makes it very difficult to assess the true behaviour of the animal in question. There has been significant research both in Australia and overseas that formal animal assessments are not always a predictor of behaviour due to the environment and time frame it is completed. Ideally an animal's behaviour should be observed and noted by various people in different circumstances, environments and timeframes. Observations taken while feeding, training, in playgroups, meeting new volunteers and being walked including past other animals enclosures are a far better indicator of future potential behaviour but is not full proof. We have known animals that have not passed formal behaviour assessments behave beautifully in a home environment and the opposite as has also been found to be true. We are lucky as we have an 100 acre property behind the main shelter area which allows us to take the dogs in particular elsewhere for enrichment, training and meets and greets. This also enables us to observe their behaviour in a different environment away from and noise and smell of the main area and gives us additional insight. The use of foster carers can also assist in the assessment of an animals behaviour as they provide yet another environment more aligned with a home environment. This does have potential risks associated with it as it is outside the shelter's control.

The challenges associated with the number of homeless cats living in New South Wales for both pounds and animal rescue organisations is huge. The strategy of Trap, Neuter and Return (TNR) has been well researched both here and overseas. The outcome of TNR is very positive and has been well documented in the CIE report on the Rehoming of Companion Animals in NSW date September 2022. The issue will be funding and enlisting

organisations prepared to do this work. World League for the Protection of Animals, situated in Gladesville, a suburb in Sydney, has been carrying out TNR since 2003 at least not before. Volunteers at that time carried out TNR for colonies based round petrol stations, fast food outlets and multi-story buildings, such as office buildings, apartments and schools, as all had a good source of food and shelter. Colonies often numbered 15-20 cats and the challenge was to capture each member and finding a vet who was happy and had the facilities to take semi feral or feral cats for neutering. Rural towns in NSW would find this far more difficult due to the shortage of vets and volunteers to do the work. Most rural councils ignore the community cat or semi owned cat issue, they do not trap them and nor do they provide for them. They leave them to continue to breed out of control and depend on a few in the community to try to accommodate them. The Getting 2 Zero Organisation, sponsored by AWL Queensland, has a community cat program and will present the benefits to Councils throughout Australia.