

## INQUIRY INTO POUNDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

**Organisation:** Dubbo Regional Council

**Date Received:** 17 August 2023

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Partially  
Confidential

AU23/145780  
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17 August 2023



The Chair  
Portfolio Committee No. 8  
Hon E Hurst MLC  
Parliament of New South Wales  
6 Macquarie Street  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Ms Hurst

**DUBBO REGIONAL COUNCIL SUBMISSION IN RESPONSE TO NSW LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO.8 - INQUIRY INTO POUNDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

As the owner and operator of the Dubbo City Animal Shelter, Dubbo Regional Council thanks you for the opportunity to provide input into the Inquiry into Pounds in NSW.

Dubbo City Animal Shelter (shelter) services a Local Government Area covering 7,536 square kilometres with a population of approximately 55,843 (projected to increase 1.2% annually to 65,700 by 2040).

At maximum capacity the shelter can hold 82 dogs and 24 cats. Over the last three financial years the shelter has housed an average of 2216 dogs and cats annually, with over 40% of maximum capacity being introduced on a weekly basis. The shelter currently has a waiting list of 103 dogs and 76 cats to be surrendered due to the facility being at capacity.

The current shelter is a sub-standard, ageing asset that is well overdue for renewal. In a period of constrained budgets and competing community priorities, higher maintenance needs have over stretched available funding necessary to maintain the facility to a desired standard. The result manifests in more regular outbreak of disease within the shelter and overcrowding leading to further challenges as the Dubbo community grows and legislation changes.

Dubbo Regional Council is in the planning and design phase to replace the existing shelter with a new facility with capacity for 101 dogs (including isolation and dangerous dog pens) and 40 cats. The estimated cost for the project is \$6 million - Council has had no access to grant funding to realise this project which to date has not commenced.



All communications to: **CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**

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Following are Council's specific comments in respect of the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry:

**a) Resourcing challenges affecting New South Wales pounds, including the adequacy of funding given towards the operation of pounds by local and state governments**

By way of example, Dubbo Animal Shelter had an operating cost of approximately \$500,000 for the 2022/2023 Financial Year. Income was restricted to \$78,190 (reimbursed by the NSW State Government from the Companion Animal Registrations) and \$58,323 from a combination of impounded maintenance fees, sale of animals, microchipping, donations and sundry items. It is also notable that the shelter operation benefits from corporate donations of dry food that would add an estimated additional \$50,000 to operational costs. This is a medium term arrangement and is not guaranteed.

The remaining \$363,000+ shortfall was made up from Council's general revenue.

Operating costs were over budget in the 2022/2023 Financial Year due to required increased staffing levels. This is directly attributed to the shelter operating at or near capacity for the majority of the year due to the high surrender levels - for the first time the shelter was forced to implement a surrender waitlist. The ageing state of the shelter facility also contributes to the higher staffing needs due to additional cleaning/disease prevention, disease outbreak response and emergency minor maintenance.

It should be apparent from this overview that external funding does not feature in operation of the shelter.

**(b) The adequacy of pound buildings and facilities in New South Wales**

Dubbo's Animal Shelter as well as the majority of other regional council facilities have small often very old facilities.

At maximum capacity the Dubbo Animal Shelter can hold 82 dogs and 24 cats. Over the last three financial years the shelter has housed an average of 2216 dogs and cats annually, with over 40% of the facility's maximum capacity being introduced on a weekly basis additional to existing residents. The shelter currently has a waiting list of 179 animals (103 dogs and 76 cats) to be surrendered due to the facility being at capacity.

The current Dubbo Animal Shelter is a sub-standard, ageing asset that is well overdue for renewal. In a period of constrained budgets and competing community priorities, higher maintenance needs have over stretched available funding capacity that is necessary to maintain the facility to a desired standard. The result manifests in overcrowding and regular outbreaks of disease such as Cat Flu, Canine Parvovirus, Kennel Cough and Ringworm.

**(c) Welfare challenges facing animals in pounds across New South Wales, including the provision of housing**

**Feeding** – Council is fortunate in that all dry food is donated. This is not guaranteed and if (when) this were to cease Council may be forced to cut costs in other areas of operations (\$48,000 – \$54,000 annually).

**Exercise** – A lack of staff and time means that the majority of the animals do not get exercised regularly. Another factor contributing to this is the lack of exercise yards and the maintenance and ground keeping imposts of the existing exercise yard.

**Enrichment** – It is Council's local experience that resourcing levels simply do not make it viable for any formal enrichment activities to be provided for housed animals.

**Veterinary treatment** - Dubbo is fortunate that we have five vets in our Local Government Area who we work with on a rostered basis to tend to animals based at the shelter. However there is little to no subsidy to the fees charged to Council for veterinary services and Council spend in the order of 15% of the operational budget on a variety of veterinary services.

Additionally, the shelter has formed relationships with RSPCA and Animal Welfare League who visit the shelter twice a year and provide free vaccination, microchipping and health check days.

As costs increase, budgets become tighter and vet numbers decrease it is anticipated that adequate levels of services being made available for the welfare of housed animals could be jeopardised.

**Vaccination** - In order to reduce disease and stress to both the animals and shelter staff, Council have started to vaccinate cats with Felo Vax 3 and dogs with Parvac upon arrival at the shelter. It should however be noted that these vaccinations are proving difficult to procure.

This comes with an additional financial burden and at the expense of other operations but is necessary to reduce the incidence of Cat Flu and Canine Parvovirus in the animal shelter. To assist in this space, the shelter has formed relationships with RSPCA and Animal Welfare League who visit the shelter twice a year and provide free vaccinations.

Since implementing the vaccination program, euthanasia rates of cats affected by Cat Flu has dropped 82% from the 2021/2022 Financial Year to the 2022/2023 Financial Year.

Similarly, euthanasia rates of dogs affected by Parvovirus has dropped 48% from the 2021/2022 Financial Year to the 2022/2023 Financial Year.

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**Desexing** - All the animals that Council adopt out are desexed before leaving the shelter. This is normally done at the local vet but there can be delays. Every 4-6 months the Animal Welfare League vet truck attends to our shelter and offers desexing for our shelter animals at a discounted rate. Council must manage this carefully to avoid paying for animals to be desexed that cannot be rehomed.

**(d) The adequacy of the laws, regulations and codes governing New South Wales pounds, including the Companion Animals Act 1998 (NSW) and the NSW Animal Welfare Code of Practice No 5 – Dogs and cats in animal boarding establishments (1996), as well as the adequacy of the current enforcement and compliance regime**

The amendment to the Companion Animals Act around the rehoming of animals has had a major effect on the overcrowding of animals shelters and rescue organisations. In fact it has led to rescue organisations being unable to help Pounds to rehome dogs in particular. Pounds are therefore remaining at capacity as they are unable to move dogs on. At the Dubbo Animal Shelter, this has resulted in overnight pens/drop off facilities being closed and contributed to the new situation where we now have long surrender waitlists.

The stress caused to animals is increased due to having to be in a noisy pound environment for longer periods of time. Dogs that were previously suitable for rehoming due to their nature have become unsuitable due to the negative impact of the stress from being in the pound environment for longer periods of time.

**(e) Factors influencing the number of animals ending up in New South Wales pounds, and strategies for reducing these numbers**

Some factors affecting the number of animals ending up in pounds are listed following:

- People think that they can make quick money by allowing their animals to breed enabling them to sell the puppies/kittens. However, often they cannot find buyers to take the animals. They then surrender the puppies/kittens or give them away to people which means more unregistered, non-microchipped and non desexed animals in the community.
- Owners are working more to be able to afford the cost of living increases, reducing the time owners have for their pets. The animals then are more likely to become destructive, untrained, prone to escaping, roaming etc.
- Higher costs of living (including rising vet fees) contribute to owners not being able to afford vet bills (desexing, vaccinations).
- Owners are more often not collecting their animals from pounds as they can less afford the fees (particularly when they are liable for the costs of having their animals microchipped or registered).

Strategy's that would help include the introduction of a legislative requirement that all pets are to be desexed, excluding registered breeders. This strategy would bring down the high incidence of back yard breeding and of free animals being offered on social media.

An additional strategy may include the introduction of a law restricting dog and cat ownership in the urban area (2-3 dogs and/or 2-3 cats per residence) excluding registered breeders. This strategy may permit requests to have more animals through Local Councils.

**(g) The role and challenges of behavioural assessments in New South Wales pounds**

Behavioural assessments in pounds is much needed however due to lack of funds, staff and resources this is difficult to achieve. Staff do a basic health and behaviour assessment of the animal during its stay as behaviours change over time in the pound environment to assess suitability for rehoming.

A more standardised approach and resourcing support to assist pounds across the state in the assessment of animal's behaviour, would result in all NSW pounds having the capability to more effectively determine an animal's suitability for rehoming. This would achieve better outcomes for more animals, the community who adopt, and greatly support the staff who run the shelters.

**(h) The relationship between New South Wales pounds and animal rescue organisations**

Dubbo Animal Shelter has a working relationship with several rescue organisations including Australian Working Dog Rescue, Pets Haven Foundation Victoria, Animal Welfare League Dubbo Branch, Adopted a bully.

RSPCA and Animal Welfare League visit the shelter twice a year and provide free vaccination, microchipping and health check days.

Shelter staff have attempted to contact every animal rescue groups on the list from Office of Local Government. Of note, 90% do not respond at all and the 10% that have responded have been unable to assist with finding homes for animals.

**(i) 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**

Dubbo Animal Shelter had 834 stray cats enter the shelter from 1 July 2022 to 30 June 2023.

- Only 25 of those cats belonged to someone and were collected by their owner. 61 were adopted and 197 were sent to rescue organisations.
- 479 were deemed to be feral cats.

Cats are easily accessible on social media and it is our experience that when someone loses a cat it's easier to get a new one off social media for free then look for or collect from the pound.

Introducing a requirement to desex cats (excluding registered breeders) would greatly help with this situation.

**(j) Strategies for improving the treatment, care and outcomes for animals in New South Wales pounds**

Strategies can be developed to deal with improving, treatment, care and outcomes for animals in pounds but this is all reliant on funding to provide the extra staff and resources to be able to implement them.

As stated previously, Dubbo Animal Shelter expended a budget of \$500,000 in the last financial year, receiving funding (reimbursement from Companion Animal Registrations) of only \$78,190 from the NSW Government.

**(k) Any other related matter**

Council pounds are trying their best to accommodate lost, stray and surrendered animals but as we have demonstrated above it difficult to maintain the quality of care and time for exercise and enrichment of the animals in the hope of being able to rehome them.

Unfortunately pounds are not retirement villages for animals and the staff have to endure making difficult decisions and assist with euthanising of animals that have declined in behaviour and health due to being in the pound environment for too long.

Desexing programs would make a significant difference to the amount of unwanted or lost animals in the community. However it is unrealistic to expect local Councils to implement such programs without financial assistance from the State Government.

Of the 94 rescue organisations registered with the Office of Local Government Dubbo Animal Shelter has received very limited help with rehoming our animals as most rescues are based in Sydney or on the coast and therefore do not service regional areas. Common reasons given for not being able to service Dubbo are travel distance and dog type. Larger dog breeds are common in regional areas and with smaller dogs proving easier to rehome.

Due to lack of space at other regional council facilities we often have dogs surrendered from people in neighbouring areas such as Narromine, Gilgandra, Coonabarabran, Cobar, Coonamble, Molong and Nyngan just mention a few.

Yours faithfully

*Murray Wood*  
Chief Executive Officer