

**Submission
No 65**

INQUIRY INTO POUNDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Australian Institute of Local Government Rangers

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Australian Institute of Local Government Rangers



Submission into NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 8

Inquiry into Pounds in NSW

Executive Summary

- The AILGR is wholly supportive of improvements to animal welfare, improved rehoming outcomes and safer and healthier pound conditions for all.
- Without a revitalisation of funding models and pounds, rehoming amendments and longer holding periods will continue to set the conditions for negative outcomes for both companion animals and pound staff.
- The management of homeless cats requires an all of government approach, underpinned by community involvement.
- There is an urgent requirement for the modernisation and improvement of the companion animal management and regulatory framework.
- Improved transparency and a transformation of the companion animal funding model is necessary and vital to ensure robust and sustainable pounds across NSW.
- Access to relevant services throughout the State is not universal and a single model to improve companion animal rehoming and welfare is unlikely to be effective.

Introduction

The Australian Institute of Local Government Rangers (AILGR) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Portfolio Committee's Inquiry into Pounds in NSW.

The AILGR is an incorporated industry body formed in 1975 to develop the skills, knowledge and professionalism of the local government regulatory industry.

In FY22/23, AILGR consisted of 196 members across 80 organisations and NSW councils, and is a member of the NSW Companion Animal Task Force.

The objectives of the AILGR are to:

- To improve the professional status and advance interests of our calling
- To seek and implement the establishment of training courses and standards of competence in the profession
- To educate members in their legal and moral responsibilities in relation to their duties and the community
- To co-operate with any appropriate body to further these objects
- To promote a high standard of integrity and efficiency in our calling
- To combine in one body all persons who are eligible for membership under these rules
- To publish at regular intervals reports and/or newsletters setting forth the policies, plans and achievements of the Institute
- To bring before the public, (NSW) Government and other appropriate bodies, matters of concern to the Institute or its members

Survey representation. In making this submission, the AILGR received feedback from members who were responsible for the operation of a local government pound, managed a

pound but were not required to attend on a regular basis, or attended the pound regularly to deliver animals (at least once every 10 days).

Responses to the Terms of Reference

Funding of pounds. AILGR notes that local governments are generally responsible for the funding of pounds, with much of this funding being derived from companion animal registration revenue distributed by the Office of Local Government (OLG). This funding model has not changed despite the introduction of rehoming amendments which increase the minimum holding periods for companion animals taken to a pound, in most cases doubling this period as well as additional staff resources required for rehoming activities, observation of the animals and increased record keeping requirements. In addition, competitive OLG grants are infrequently offered, but are generally only available for targeted initiatives or other general activities that promote responsible pet ownership and is not available for the funding of pounds. Registration revenue however is also meant to contribute to council's broader responsibilities for the care and management of companion animals, including education, off leash exercise areas and regulation. Pounds generally charge applicable fees and charges, as permitted under the Companion Animals Act (the 'Act'), to offset operating costs. Pound fees and charges, especially about the rehoming of companion animals, do not come anywhere near the actual costs associated with caring for an animal taken to the pound, the provision of veterinary care, and desexing. Pounds often rely on community donations or financial support from local 'friends of the pound' type groups for food, blankets, advertising, and the costs of specialty veterinary care. Notwithstanding, the actual funding provided by local governments for pounds is not easy to identify. Local government annual reports are required to include information on a council's activities in relation to enforcing and ensuring compliance with the provisions of the Act - Local Government (General) Regulation 2021, clause 217(1)(f) – however, this information does not include the amount of companion animal registration revenue received, or the percentage of this revenue that is actually allocated for pound operations.

Pound facilities. Similarly, pounds have been designed and maintained to reflect minimum holding requirements under the Act and find themselves with inadequate and aged facilities for the keeping of animals for extended periods of time. Notwithstanding, there are no Australian Standards for pound design, and there are no NSW guidelines or codes of practice for the realistic management of companion animals in pounds for local governments to benchmark against or drive the improvements necessary in this space and to meet local community expectations

Pound welfare challenges. Animal welfare provided at pounds is a direct outcome of its location and available operating budget. Pounds in rural areas have extremely limited access to services that contribute to the welfare and enrichment of their companion animals, specifically veterinary and behavioural services. The outcome of rehoming amendments has significantly increased the challenges of providing for the wellbeing and enrichment of companion animals at pounds for extended periods of time. There are no applicable codes of practice for pounds that outline standards for the accommodation, management and care that are appropriate to the physical and behavioural needs of companion animals housed in a pound. The requirement to hold companion animals for longer periods because of rehoming amendments directly impacts on animal welfare, when combined with the lack of access to adequate resources and services, and often directly leads to negative behaviour and health outcomes for companion animals. The absence of industry codes of practice that relate to the welfare of animals taken to pounds, in particular for health and disease control, result in ad hoc and inconsistent processes that are driven by location and available resources of the pound. A particular challenge in this space, however, is to only focus on this end of the spectrum and to not provide sufficient attention to the welfare of companion animals in minimising their risk of entering the pound system at all.

The number of animals in pounds. Simply put, companion animals are taken to pounds because their owner cannot be found. Owners are not able to be found due to microchip details being out of date, the animal not being permanently identified (microchipped) at all, or that the animal was not wearing an identification tag as required. Microchip details are often out of date largely due to owners not being required to provide current details through an annual registration process, a far from efficient or user-friendly registration system (the Companion Animal Register), and a complex process of changing owner details from breeders to new owners. Companion animals that are not reclaimed from pounds are because owners cannot be found, or owners are unable to pay the required fees and charges to reclaim or are unable to pay the applicable registration fee (this is particularly the case when more than one animal from the same owner has been taken to a pound). The number of companion animals that enter pounds is indicative of the scale of continued and unregulated backyard breeding and incidental litters.

Euthanasia in pounds. It is pleasing to see that euthanasia rates in pounds continue to decrease annually. It is noted that adopting alternatives to euthanasia can be subject to the availability of resources, veterinary care, access to potential new owners and access to rehoming organisations. Therefore, implementing alternatives to euthanasia can be more difficult in rural than regional or metropolitan areas, and a single model is unlikely to be effective across all situations. AILGR acknowledges that there always be the requirement for euthanasia in pounds to reflect injured and diseased animals, or unable to be rehomed due to legislation and behaviour. Again, there is an opportunity to ensure sufficient attention to the prevention of companion animals entering the pound system at all and minimise euthanasia rates completely.

Behavioural assessments in pounds. AILGR members understand that they and their respective organisations, have a duty of care to ensure for the suitable rehoming of companion animals into the community. Prescribed behavioural assessments will support the efforts of pounds in their role of rehoming companion animals and contribute to them

adding value into the families and communities they join. Again, the ability to implement and maintain ongoing behavioural assessments is not universal across NSW and subject to access of services, access to industry training, suitably qualified assessors, and potential new owners. The quality and benefit of behavioural assessments conducted in a stressful and artificial pound environment, should also certainly be balanced against the observations and judgements of experienced pound staff. Industry training in this space will only add value to positive rehoming outcomes.

Approved rehoming organisations and pounds. The relationship between pounds and Approved Rehoming Organisations (ARO) is critical in finding suitable companion animals for rehoming and new homes for those animals. Like pounds, ARO play a vital role in the facilitation of volunteering and capacity building in local communities. The availability of ARO to accept companion animals continues to face ongoing economic pressures as well as the sheer numbers of animals required to find new homes. The shared experience of AILGR members is that ARO are also currently struggling to cope with the increased numbers associated with rehoming amendments and longer holding periods.

Challenges of homeless cats in NSW. The issue of homeless cats in NSW can be a polarising issue. However, cats are the only domesticated animal in NSW that do not have any legislation to restrict their movement and unlike dogs, may be taken to a pound without ever being owned by a person. These issues are underpinned by the fact that cats are such prolific breeders and are likely to have a detrimental effect on native fauna. The experience of the AILGR is that local governments are unlikely to actively resolve community cat populations due to the associated outcomes of euthanasia, disease control in pounds and rehoming numbers. The shared experience of AILGR membership is that there are insufficient and inadequate laws that specifically relate to the issues faced by communities and stake holders with regards to cats and a broader strategic approach and positive action must be considered to break the cycle, and the AILGR is interested in becoming involved in this space.

Improved outcomes for animals in pounds. Improving treatment, care and outcomes for animals taken to a pound is linked to the ability of the pound to quickly reunite animals with their owners. Where this is not possible, then to quickly rehome animals with new owners. Both outcomes are related to the availability of funding and services. Notwithstanding, preventing companion animals from ever entering the pound system (such as ensuring up to date animal identification) will provide the most improved pound outcomes, making the best use of limited resources.

Other related pound matters.

Desexing models. There is opportunity to provide subsidised desexing models at the state government level, like subsidy initiatives currently provided through the Service NSW model, however, it is acknowledged that this will be limited by the availability of veterinary services. There is also opportunity to review desexing requirements for the ownership of all companion animals, providing suitable and relevant exemptions where required.

Report outcomes. The AILGR looks forward to the urgent publication of the *Rehoming of Companion Animals in NSW* report and supporting recommendations, to help improve successful rehoming outcomes and to reduce any unnecessary euthanasia of companion animals.

Pound staff. The wellbeing, health and safety of all people involved in pound operations should also be considered when looking to improve successful companion animal rehoming outcomes. The arbitrary keeping of companion animals that are plainly unsuitable for responsible rehoming, creates a negative and unsafe situation for everyone involved. Safe, positive and collaborative pound environments for staff is critical, and will undoubtedly strengthen and underpin improvements in animal welfare and care.

On behalf of the Australian Institute of Local Government Rangers, I thank you for the opportunity to present this submission and for taking the time to consider the contents.

Yours faithfully

Greg Tredinnick

Secretary

Australian Institute of Local Government Rangers