

INQUIRY INTO POUNDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Name suppressed

Date Received: 18 August 2023

Partially
Confidential

RESPONSE TO PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO POUNDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

RESPONSES TO TERMS OF REFERENCE

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

At the local level many rangers face the challenge of providing adequate care for the animals in the pound due to resourcing, and this can cause a great deal of stress in an already stressful job.

Many rural and remote pounds receive donations for basic items like food, bedding and bowls. It should be the responsibility of the local or state government to provide items required to meet a minimum standard of care for animals in pounds and not the ad hoc efforts of individuals and volunteer organisations.

Where funding is limited, alternative solutions should be explored, such as:

- formal partnerships between the Council, animal welfare organisations (e.g. Animal Rescue Cooperative), pet food suppliers (e.g. for their close to out-of-date products or products with damaged packaging)

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

There is a huge variation in the standard of pound buildings and facilities. The standard generally declines as the distance from major cities increases. A minimum standard, especially with protection from weather extremes, should be established and upgrades funded where needed.

Transportable 'pod' type structures that are insulated, secure and hygienic should be investigated.

(c) welfare challenges facing animals in pounds across New South Wales, including the provision of housing, bedding, feeding, exercise, enrichment, veterinary treatment, vaccination and desexing

The job description for pound employees is inconsistent. A minimum standard (e.g. Certificate II in Animal Care) or standardised level of knowledge would help address many welfare challenges. There may be difficulties finding suitable employees in rural and remote areas due to factors such as smaller populations, however if there are otherwise suitable candidates who do not meet the minimum educational requirements, then tailored training should be made available to them.

At present, many rural pounds receive ad hoc donations of bedding, bowls and food from volunteer organisations. Without this support, in some facilities animals:

- do not have bedding, which can result in hypothermia especially in young, unwell or old animals
- are fed cheap/poor quality food, which can result in weight loss and illness. Animals leaving the pound in poor condition generally require more time until they can be rehomed (if going to a rescue organisation)
- are fed directly on the ground which increases the risk of contamination with urine and faeces and the spread of parasites (e.g. intestinal worms) and diseases (e.g. parvovirus)

Whilst this ad hoc support improves the welfare of animals in pounds, meeting minimum standards is not the responsibility of volunteers. Minimum facilities and equipment should be provided and maintained by Council or government.

Exercise and enrichment varies significantly between facilities. Correctly implemented volunteer programs can provide this. Any volunteer program must include training in animal handling, disease control, pound protocols and animal welfare.

Granting volunteers access to pounds has the added benefit of creating transparency about the operation and conditions in the pound.

A common Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) template for arrangements between pounds and local vets could be a way of establishing a base line for the standard of health care of pound animals. A central register of MOUs and periodic renewal processes could ensure the standard is maintained.

Pounds in some locations do not have access to a local vet. The following options for providing vet care should be explored:

- Funding a vet to visit these pounds in rotation to microchip, worm and vaccinate animals going to rescue organisations; and to desex animals being rehomed directly from the pound
- Partnering with AWL and/or RSPCA to access veterinarian services
- Partnering with universities offering veterinarian degrees

Many rescue organisations communicate with each other. News of a parvovirus outbreak in a pound spreads quickly and many rescue organisations will stop taking animals from that location for a while due to the risk of bringing sick dogs into care. The crippling costs of treating parvovirus can send a rescue organisation under.

(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

Before considering the governance of pounds, it is first important to consider current laws, regulations and codes relating to the **ownership and care of companion animals** – and their enforcement – because they have a direct impact on pounds in terms of the animals that end up in facilities and their physical and mental condition.

Current laws are ineffective in controlling:

- rampant backyard breeding for profit, shown by a quick look at Gumtree and other advertising channels such as Facebook (although not permitted)
- unplanned breeding due to lack of education, carelessness and other factors, evidenced by the number of pregnant cats and dogs and litters entering pounds
- large scale puppy breeding operations, demonstrated by the number still in operation
- animal hoarding, shown by the number of cases raised in animal welfare forums

Current laws must be tightened and enforced. New laws must be introduced to address areas where other laws fail to control breeding and the number of animals owned by an individual.

An animal registration amnesty that is free for residents could help identify a greater number of animals in a council area and provide better data for management and planning.

An Animal Owner Register, linked to the NSW Companion Animal Register, containing information such as: animal welfare offences, whether the person has previously surrendered animals to a pound, etc. that can be accessed in varying levels of detail by councils (detailed access), veterinarians, rescue organisations (stop light system), could help prevent animals ending up in the possession of unsuitable people.

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

Desex, desex, desex! The cost of desexing and access to a vet (especially in rural and remote areas) is a major barrier to desexing. Animals being released from many rural and remote pounds are NOT desexed, which can continue the cycle of creating unwanted animals.

A concerted effort to deliver free or heavily subsidised desexing could help to get on top of the problem. This should be available to everyone, not just concession card holders, especially in the current economic climate.

Incentives like free pet food – provided by sponsors – could increase uptake rates.

Other strategies include educating people about responsible pet ownership and selecting suitable pets.

Often the reclaim fee of undesexed animals from pounds is very high. The high cost can result in animals being abandoned in the pound. The release fee could instead be redirected to having the animal desexed. If the animal has ended up in the pound, it was most likely wandering and therefore had more chance of unplanned breeding.

The housing crisis is leading to many people having to surrender beloved animals because they cannot find somewhere to live that allows pets. Councils could consider incentives like offering rate relief to landlords who accept tenants with pets.

The cost of living is also creating challenges for some pet owners. There are many wellbeing benefits of keeping pets with their owners (that can lead to savings in the health and aged care system). For some, the expense of caring for a pet is a luxury when they are struggling to meet basic needs, like putting food on the table and paying rent. Council / government could work with pet product companies and local not-for-profit food relief organisations to include pet food and animal health products in their offerings.

A clever social media campaign aimed at people who anthropomorphise castrating their dogs – along the lines of the “pinkie campaign” aimed to challenge the attitudes of young drivers about speeding – could be effective. And other campaign – with messaging aimed at people who think “letting” their female animal have one litter is a wonderful thing to do – could have an impact on unfounded, unnecessary breeding. Funding could be allocated by the State Government or the OLG to create the campaign or it could be run as a competition within a community, school, TAFE or university course.

(f) euthanasia rates and practices in New South Wales pounds, including the adequacy of reporting of euthanasia rates and other statistics

No comment made

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

Behavioural assessments play a very important role in:

- Community safety (for example, recognising dangerous dogs)
- Matching animals with prospective owners
- Managing an animal’s welfare in the pound (for example, recognising signs of stress and health issues)
- Building trust with rescue organisations by accurately describing an animal’s temperament so the organisation can determine whether they can provide a suitable environment (e.g. only dog household, someone who is home a lot) to match animals with foster carers

Behaviour is very difficult to assess in a shelter environment, where most animals are stressed and/or in a high state of arousal.

Animals can be so overwhelmed in pounds that they can demonstrate negative behaviours such as shutting down, fear aggression, excessive barking, barrier aggression, pacing and self-mutilation.

Before behaviour assessments are done on animals that are displaying undesirable behaviour, a health check should be done to rule out issues like pain, which can affect an animal’s behaviour significantly.

Training for pound staff is required. Standardising behavioural assessments as much as possible, with tools like lickert scales and scores, could reduce differences between assessors and pounds. For example, at present,

some pounds may deem an animal as 'not rehomeable' due to fearful behaviour, whereas at another pound may describe an animal displaying the same behaviour as 'timid'.

One of the benefits of pounds working with rescue organisations is the animals leaving the pound can be assessed in an environment that somewhat resembles their future home, prior to adoption.

A comprehensive Surrender Form and Questionnaire which asks for information about specific behaviours in a number of different ways (e.g. how is it with other dogs, does it like smaller dogs, how does it play with more energetic dogs, does it react to male dogs etc.) to create a detailed description of animal's past behaviour in different situations could be used to inform behaviour assessments. However, unfortunately, the information provided by many individuals surrender animals can't be relied on completely.

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

Relationships between pounds and rescue organisations vary vastly. The quality of the relationship is often due to the standard of operation of both parties. Those who operate in a more structured manner and have the most professional conduct tend to have better relationships.

The relationship is also influenced by individuals. In some cases, a personal conflict between a ranger and an individual from a rescue organisation can have a significant negative impact on the outcomes for animals in a pound.

There is a lot of variation between how different pounds work with rescue organisations. At one end, there are pounds where it is difficult to obtain information about impounded animals (e.g. difficult to contact, limited details available). At the other end, there are pounds with rangers who go out of their way to accommodate animal pick-ups out of hours, drive long distances to collect food donations, actively promote the animals in the pound and more.

The following are suggested to foster good relationships between pounds and rescue organisations:

- The establishment of Consultation Groups between Councils and representative from key rescue organisations that take animals from their pound
- Establish clear processes for working together, e.g. nominate single contact persons, set expectations, etc.
- Training for Council staff in working with rescue organisations:
 - what rescue organisations do, how they operate, how they attain Approved Rehoming Organisation status, their reporting requirements
 - communication for positive outcomes
 - effective ways to provide information about impounded animals to rescue organisations (e.g. a standard template, central database)
 - processes for releasing animals to rescue organisations
- Training for rescue groups in:
 - how pounds operate – policies and constraints
 - communication for positive outcomes
 - processes for working with pounds

Other tailored training that would benefit rescue organisations includes:

- Establishing an incorporated association
- Charity registration
- Obtaining Deductible Gift Recipient Status
- Financial record keeping
- Reporting for Rescue Organisations

Another model

The model for “conventional” rescue organisations is to take animals from pounds, provide necessary vet and behavioural work, and rehome them to individuals.

There is another model worth exploring as a way to increase the options for pound animals.

There is an “intermediary” rescue organisation in remote NSW that takes animals from a number of surrounding pounds. The animals are not rehomed to individuals, rather they go to conventional rescue organisations (generally located in largish towns or cities) who then rehome them to individuals.

While in care with the intermediary rescue organisation, the animals are vaccinated, treated for parasites and their temperament assessed. Then the animals are listed in a Facebook group and conventional rescue organisations can offer to take them. Also in the Facebook group, individuals can pledge funds towards the transport costs to get the animals to the conventional rescue organisations – which is a considerable cost given the remote location of the pounds.

The intermediary rescue organisation operates primarily on donations from the public.

Partnership arrangements between Councils / State government could support and sustain models like this, at a lower cost to the council / government than expanding a facility.

(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

The critical first step is to introduce – and enforce – laws that DO NOT allow cats to leave their owner’s premises. This will reduce the number of cats that end up homeless and reduce unplanned breeding of undesexed cats.

Also, establish reasonable limits to the number of cats owned by an individual to reduce the risk of numbers getting out of control.

There is a need to educate people that if they have been feeding a stray cat, they must take FULL RESPONSIBILITY for its welfare (desex, vaccinate, parasite control, etc.).

Rescue organisations are often contacted by people who have been feeding a pregnant cat who ask us to take her and the kittens (often when they are 5+ months and untamed and therefore difficult to rehome).

Studies could be commissioned into the effectiveness of large-scale programs of trapping, neutering, marking (e.g. ear tip) and returning community cats in urban and suburban areas. There is evidence to suggest that this approach to population management is more effective than removing cats (because other cats simply move into vacated territories).

If studies show it is effective, although this is possibly not the most desirable solution, it could be one strategy employed to manage cat numbers and reduce the number of pregnant females and kittens coming into pounds from these colonies.

Programs in specific areas, e.g. industrial areas, could address issues within the targeted area. For example, a group of businesses could work with their council and coordinate trapping of cats, having them desexed and returned. Incentives like earning status as an accredited “Strays Off The Street” business – with some kind of Council concession or promotional benefits – may increase participation in such programs.

NSW Local Land Services, NSW Department of Primary Industries, TAFE NSW and universities could be partners in these kinds of studies.

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

There is a need for standard training for Council employees whose work relates to the operation of the pound. To ensure a minimum standard and consistency, there should be mandatory training in:

- Animal handling
- Basic animal behaviour assessment
- Animal health – recognising basic health issues that need attention during the impound period
- Disease control, i.e. quarantine, minimising cross-contamination, isolating unwell animals, disinfection
- Microchipping and entering the information into the database
- The laws on impound periods, notifying owners of lost animals, etc.
- Strategies to rehome animals from the pound (e.g. Council website, social media, email campaigns)
- Working with rescue organisations

Vaccinating and treating for internal and external parasites at the end of an animal's impound period improves its outcome. For example, if it leaves the pound and goes into rescue in good health, this reduces the time until the animal can be rehomed and therefore increases the rescue organisation's capacity to take in more animals.

(k) any other related matter.

Desex, desex, desex!