

**Submission  
No 93**

## **INQUIRY INTO POUNDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Organisation:** Lake Road Veterinary Hospital

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**Submission to the  
NSW Legislative Council  
Inquiry into**

**Pounds in NSW**

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## Introduction

Dear Members of the New South Wales Legislative Council,

I am writing on behalf of Lake Road Veterinary Hospital (LRVH), a dedicated 24-hour veterinary hospital located in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales. LRVH has been at the forefront of animal welfare, providing significant rescue services via our internal rehoming organisation and through collaboration with other rescue organisations in the community.

It is with a sense of urgency and profound concern that we approach this inquiry. The issues at hand are twofold. Firstly, there is a striking lack of government support for veterinary practices, which has led to the overuse and exploitation of our goodwill, commitment, and provision of free services. Secondly, these challenges are exacerbated by a severe workforce shortage and a burgeoning mental health crisis within our industry, placing an additional strain on the very institutions committed to ensuring the welfare of animals.

While our passion and commitment to animal care remain steadfast, we find ourselves at a critical juncture where these pressing issues are undermining our ability to fulfil our mission effectively. The current scenario has created an environment that is neither sustainable nor conducive to the best interests of the animals we strive to protect.

This submission aims to shed light on the challenges we face, articulating the need for immediate and substantial support from the government, balanced regulations, and a compassionate approach to ensure the well-being of both animals and those who care for them.

We are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this vital inquiry. We trust that the Council will take our concerns to heart, recognising the urgency of these matters, and implementing measures that will alleviate the strain on veterinary practices, foster a more humane approach to animal welfare, and address the critical shortages and mental health issues plaguing our industry.

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## Pounds and Opening Hours

Limited Accessibility: The restricted opening hours of pounds in the region pose a significant barrier to adequate animal care. Our local pound is open only 3 hours per day.

Unequal Protection for Cats: Cats are not afforded the same protections as dogs under the Companion Animal Act. This discrepancy has led to an unsettling practice where our pound does not accept cats, treating them as "free-living" and releasing them back to where they were found.

## Duty of Care for Animals

Focus on Regulation over Welfare: Many organisations view themselves as regulatory bodies rather than animal welfare entities. This perspective may overlook the genuine needs of the animals in their care.

Exploitation of Non-Profit Sector: The current system has led to the misuse and abuse of goodwill from non-profit rescue organisations and veterinary practices like ours. This unsustainable reliance without adequate support or compensation compromises the wellbeing of animals and the welfare of those providing care.

The above issues illustrate a concerning lack of cohesion and consideration in the handling of animal care within pounds, particularly regarding opening hours and the treatment of cats. Moreover, the prevailing attitude towards duty of care underscores a need for a more compassionate and unified approach to animal welfare in our region.

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## Local Ranger Services

The relationship between Lake Road Veterinary Hospital and local ranger services has been marked by inconsistencies, inefficiencies, and unequal enforcement of regulations. The primary issues of concern are as follows:

**Inequitable Enforcement of Regulations:** It has come to our attention that some members of the community are fined for having stray animals, while others are not. This discrepancy in the application of penalties undermines trust in the regulatory system and creates confusion.

**Miscommunication and Misdirection:** Our hospital has been encouraged by the council to send stray animals directly to the shelter. However, the local council call centre frequently directs these cases to us, the 24-hour veterinary hospital. This redirection would be more acceptable if we were the contracted veterinary practice, but unfortunately, we are not.

**Unsuccessful Tender Applications:** We have twice applied for the tender to become the contracted veterinary practice and were unsuccessful on both occasions. The first rejection was on the grounds of purported inexperience in vaccinating and desexing pets—a claim we find perplexing given our professional standing. The second time, we even offered to conduct daily health checks for free as a goodwill gesture, reflecting our passion for improving welfare standards, but were again declined.

**Inconsistent Pickup Services:** Local rangers' responsiveness in picking up animals from our hospital has been inconsistent and can take up to two weeks. If the shelter is full, they are even less likely to collect animals from veterinary practices, leading to unnecessary delays and potential welfare concerns.

**Misleading Availability:** Although the local ranger services advertise as being available 24 hours, the reality does not align with this promise. Their services are mediated through a call centre, and rangers will only attend if there has been a confirmed human attack. This limited availability constrains our ability to ensure timely and appropriate care for animals in distress.

The concerns listed above underscore the need for a comprehensive review of local ranger services, clear communication, equitable enforcement, and collaboration that genuinely reflects the needs and capabilities of veterinary practices like ours. We are committed to working together to enhance animal welfare standards, but these existing barriers hinder our shared objectives.

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## Strays and Emergency Treatment

The management and treatment of stray animals, particularly in emergency situations, present significant challenges that disproportionately impact veterinary hospitals. The key concerns in our local context are outlined as follows:

**Primary Responsibility for Emergency Treatment:** Unlike pounds, veterinary hospitals bear the brunt of emergency veterinary treatment for stray animals. This responsibility is not only extensive but often carried out without proper financial support or acknowledgment of the intense emotional and logistical demands it places on veterinary staff.

**Abuse of Goodwill and Legal Obligations:** In our locality, there has been a disconcerting pattern of abuse of the goodwill of out-of-hours veterinary practices by local government. Some rangers and compliance officers take undue advantage of The Veterinary Practitioners Act, which requires the provision of first aid to stray animals in the form of pain relief or euthanasia. Such exploitation gloats in the fact that the costs associated with these treatments fall on local small businesses like ours rather than their shelter budgets.

**Impact on the Veterinary Industry:** The abuse of this legal requirement is particularly concerning given the current workforce shortage and mental health crisis within the veterinary industry. Utilising an outdated piece of legislation to force veterinarians into providing free services places a heavy burden on both the individual emotionally and the business financially. It undermines the very principles of animal care and community partnership that we hold dear.

**Call for Ethical Consideration and Support:** We firmly believe that it is completely inappropriate and unethical for the government to manipulate a legal obligation in this manner. It's imperative that this issue is promptly addressed, with due consideration to updating the relevant legislation and ensuring fair financial support for veterinary practices engaged in this essential work.

In summary, the handling of strays must be reevaluated with a compassionate and equitable approach that recognises the fundamental role of veterinary hospitals. Such an approach must be aligned with contemporary values and the financial and emotional realities of veterinary practice, rather than perpetuating an unsustainable burden that ultimately compromises animal welfare and the wellbeing of veterinary professionals.

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## Animal Rescue Organisations

Local councils' exploitation of non-profit organisations, volunteers, and small businesses in handling the burden of stray companion animals and wildlife in the community has become a concerning trend. These entities, driven by a genuine commitment to animal welfare, often find themselves shouldering responsibilities that should be shared or adequately funded by local government. In relying heavily on their goodwill, dedication, and often limited resources, local councils effectively shift the financial and operational burdens away from public accountability and onto those least equipped to bear them. Such an approach undermines the very foundations of community cooperation and trust, and creates an unsustainable model where the essential care for stray and wild animals is precariously balanced on the fragile shoulders of those who are already stretching their resources to the limit. This situation calls for a reevaluation of local policies, with a focus on fair distribution of responsibilities and transparent collaboration between government bodies and the various organisations and businesses committed to animal care in the community.



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## Lake Road Vet Rescue

Lake Road Veterinary Hospital operates a rescue wing and registered Rehoming Organisation as part of its 24-hour emergency hospital service. This wing is entirely funded by our business, without any government assistance, and relies on both paid and volunteer staff throughout the year. Estimated contribution to these animals can exceed \$200,000.00 per month during busy periods. In the last twelve months, we have treated over 240 native animal cases, taken in 395 stray domestic animals, and successfully rehomed 506 cats, dogs, and other pocket pets. These numbers illustrate a significant contribution to animal welfare in our community. It is time for the legislative council to put serious thought into the way funding is allocated and efficiently utilised in NSW. Currently, animal rescue and rehoming organisations are shouldering a substantial load, yet they receive the least support and funding. An assessment and realignment of resources are imperative to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of these crucial services.

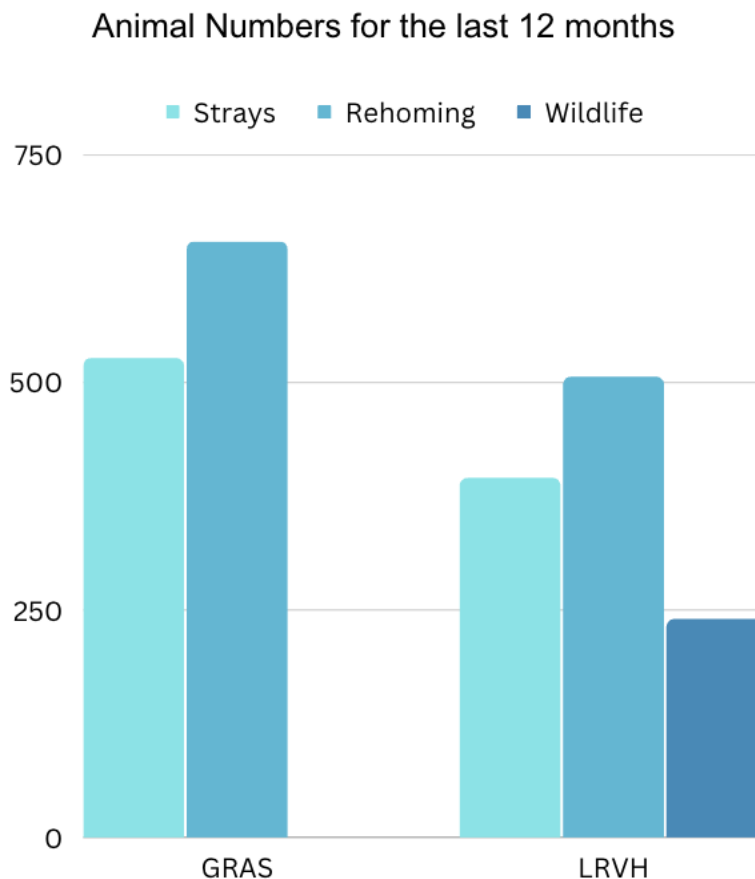


Figure: The local animal shelter Glenfield Road Animal Shelter is government funded. Our privately owned family business receives no government funding and handles almost as many animals as the local shelter for free, out of goodwill and kindness but is not sustainable.

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## Free and Charity Services

Recently, some charitable organisations have begun to provide free or heavily discounted veterinary services from mobile units. While well-intended, this initiative raises serious concerns for several reasons. First, it devalues an already struggling industry by offering services at no or minimal cost, potentially undermining the perceived worth of professional veterinary care. Second, it fails to connect pet owners in need with long-term veterinary practices, which are essential for ongoing support and the continuous care of the animals. Third, without fostering a relationship between pet owners and local practices, these mobile services may miss opportunities to educate and guide pet owners on responsible pet ownership. Lastly, these initiatives can inadvertently undercut local small businesses, including veterinary practices like ours, that support the local community and provide employment for teams of professionals. While the intention of offering accessible care is commendable, it is vital to consider the broader impact on the veterinary industry, local businesses, and the continuity of care for the animals and their owners.

## Veterinary Mental Health, Burnout and Attrition

The veterinary profession, while rewarding, is one fraught with significant challenges, particularly in dealing with stray animals, wildlife, and surrendered animals. These aspects of veterinary practice require substantial physical, emotional, and financial resources, often leading to burnout, compassion fatigue, and an unsustainable workload. As veterinary practices like Lake Road Veterinary Hospital strive to provide comprehensive care for these animals, they are increasingly facing the burden of not only treating but also housing and rehoming them. The excessive working hours required to meet these needs contribute to a growing mental health crisis within the profession. This is compounded by the expectation that veterinarians provide these services often without financial support from governmental bodies, resulting in additional stress and fatigue.

Furthermore, the demands placed on veterinary staff in dealing with the complexities of treating and managing stray and wild animals exacerbate pre-existing challenges within the profession. The emotional toll of treating often severely injured or ill animals, coupled with the bureaucratic and financial pressures associated with managing these cases, leads to an environment where mental well-being is at risk. The cumulative effect of these pressures can lead to a decrease in job satisfaction, an increase in mental health issues, and, in severe cases, the withdrawal of skilled and passionate professionals from the field. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach that acknowledges and supports the multi-faceted roles that veterinarians are asked to play, providing not only medical care but also a broader societal role in managing animal welfare. It is imperative that governments, regulatory bodies, and the wider community recognise and address these pressures to ensure the sustainability and well-being of those who dedicate their lives to animal care.

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For the companion animal industry to remain sustainable, it is essential for veterinarians to continue in the profession. They play a crucial role in supporting and educating pet owners through the entire lifespan of their pets, fostering responsible pet ownership. The retention of skilled veterinarians ensures the health and welfare of animals and contributes to a thriving and compassionate community.

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## Recommendations

### Shelter Animal Management Improvements

#### Goals for Shelters:

1. Preventing Lost Pets: Implement proactive measures to educate the public and reduce the number of lost pets.
2. Returning Lost Pets: Enhance efforts to identify and reunite lost pets with their owners in a timely manner.
3. Rehoming Non-Returned Pets: Facilitate the rehoming of pets that are not reclaimed, ensuring their welfare and proper placement without burdening local charities or small businesses.

#### Preventative Care and Disease Management:

- Preventative Care: Standardize protocols for vaccination, worming, and prevention of fleas and parasites.
- Outbreak Management: Implement robust plans for the prevention and control of common diseases such as kennel cough, cat flu, and parvo.
- Health Assessments: Mandate that all animals in pounds receive a veterinary health assessment within 24 hours of entry.
- Daily Veterinarian Walk-Through: Require all pounds to have daily walk-throughs by a veterinarian to monitor and ensure the well-being of the animals.

### Ranger Services

- Microchipping Enforcement: Strengthen regulations to ensure all companion animals are microchipped, facilitating easier identification and return to owners.
- Desexing Enforcement: Implement and rigorously enforce mandatory desexing policies for pets, with exemptions only for registered breeders or specific medical reasons.

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- **Yard Limit Enforcement:** Establish and enforce clear regulations on the maximum number of animals that can be kept in residential yards, taking into consideration the welfare of the animals and the potential impact on neighbours.
  - **Fines and Fees:** Set appropriate and consistent fines and fees for stray and surrendered animals. The structure of these fines and fees should reflect the seriousness of the offence and be consistently enforced across all jurisdictions.

By addressing these areas, Ranger Services can play a crucial role in promoting responsible pet ownership and animal welfare, while also ensuring that rules are applied uniformly and fairly across the community. There is also a significant financial benefit to these enforcement measures. By implementing and adhering to these policies, revenue can be generated that will be directly invested in the care of the animals. This additional funding will enable the expansion of services and the enhancement of the quality of care provided, thereby creating a more robust and effective animal welfare system.

## Veterinary Practices

- **Charging Provisions:**
  - Authorise veterinary practices to charge stray animal owners for impound/boarding fees, administration, and handling fees for reuniting their pets.
- **Body Disposal Compensation:**
  - Establish a mechanism for councils to compensate veterinary practices for stray animal body disposal or group cremation.
- **Promotion of Paid Veterinary Programs:**
  - Encourage councils to promote paid primary school education program, puppy preschool programs, desexing, vaccination and microchipping education programs through established veterinary hospitals, opting for more direct engagement rather than cumbersome tender processes.
- **Out-of-Hours Services:**
  - Explore the possibility of emergency veterinary services providing out-of-hours services, which could potentially reduce ranger costs. This would necessitate a comprehensive agreement to ensure it is a properly compensated service.

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## Animal Rehoming Organisations

- Better Funding budgets and allocations for stray, homeless, orphaned and injured animals while in care of these organisations.
- Local government is not to abuse the kindness of these organisations as they only existed due to the shortcomings of their own facilities.

These recommendations aim to enhance the welfare and management of animals in shelters, strengthen the support for veterinary practices, and foster collaboration between shelters, veterinary hospitals, and local councils. Together, these measures can build a more humane, efficient, and responsible system for the care and management of stray and impounded animals in New South Wales.