

**Submission
No 104**

INQUIRY INTO POUNDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Friends of the Wingecarribee Animal Shelter (FOWAS)

Date Received: 21 August 2023

RE: SUBMISSION – LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL INQUIRY INTO POUNDS NSW

FRIENDS OF THE WINGECARRIBEE SHELTER (FOWAS) MOSS VALE NSW

BACKGROUND FOWAS was founded in 2006 as a Not for Profit organisation. It is registered with NSW Fair Trading and is an Incorporated Association under the Associations Incorporation Act (2009). We are also registered with the Australian Charities and Not for Profits Commission (ACNC). Our mission is to work with Wingecarribee Shire Council (WSC) and Wingecarribee Animal Shelter (WAS), the Community and local Businesses to enhance the welfare and rehoming of displaced animals whilst they wait for adoption at the WAS. FOWAS is a professional organisation with a significant brand influence across the Southern Highlands. Please refer to Attachment – FOWAS Charter for further details.

The WAS is currently funded by the WSC and is responsible for overseeing the operation of the animal shelter. Over the years, there have been various management arrangements for the shelter, including a tender in 2014 where local council outsourced the management and running of the shelter to the Lost Dogs Home, which was concluded in 2013 by the organisation.

After an extended and arduous effort led by FOWAS, shelter volunteers and community of the Southern Highlands, there was a significant mind set change with council management. As a result of our campaign, the councillors and management of the council ultimately decided to transition the management of the animal shelter in-house. Veterinary services were put out to tender.

This decision marked a turning point in the shelter's history, underlining the commitment of FOWAS and the community in ensuring the well-being of animals in need. The collaborative efforts then and now of FOWAS demonstrates the passion for improving the shelter's operations and enhance the quality of care for companion animals.

FOWAS authored and collaborated with the council to implement the Wingecarribee Animal Shelter – Alternatives to Euthanasia Policy (attached). This policy, which received endorsement for a second time on December 11th 2019, is a testament to our councils shared commitment with FOWAS and the community to enhancing animal welfare outcomes. This policy extends beyond the boundaries of conventual animal welfare regulations. By offering a broader prospective on possible alternative to euthanasia. This policy is due for review December this year and as the council is under administration, we have grave concerns that this policy will not be renewed.

The partnership between FOWAS and council plays a pivotal role in supporting this policy. One noteworthy example is the possibility of performing elective surgeries on animals that would typically be subject to euthanasia. It highlights council and community volunteers working together to provide a compassionate and comprehensive outlook, on ensuring animals receive the best possible care and opportunities for a new life.

The current WAS, which has been in operation for 23 years is situated within the WSC Resource Recovery Centre (or as know by the locals the "the tip"). When the animal shelter was opened it became apparent that it lacked in essential infrastructure including appropriate storage facilities, bedding and exercise areas. The establishment of FOWAS marked a significant step towards creating a sustainable and collaborative solutions for animal welfare in our shire. By partnering with the council, FOWAS aimed to bridge the gap between the shelter's needs and available resources, ensuring that animals receive the care, attention they deserved under animal welfare regulations.

FOWAS's tireless dedication and persistent advocacy over the last ten years has yielded a momentous achievement with councillors and council management allocating funds to purchase land and construct a new animal shelter. This step is a testament to the shared belief that animals deserve the best possible care and facilities in our shire.

The WSC was placed into administration on the 12th of March 2021, this has triggered a series of complex challenges and changes for FOWAS and the WAS and the broader community. FOWAS was interviewed for an independent report regarding us, the animal shelter staff, and volunteers in July 2021. We are still waiting for council to report back to us with the recommendations regarding FOWAS. (Animal Shelter Report attached).

Our concern with the council being in administration is that FOWAS are slowly being ghosted from assisting the animal shelter and providing funds for the new animal shelter build even though we have done everything in our power to maintain open lines of communication on our shared goals for the animal shelter.

TERMS OF REFERENCE:

1. That portfolio Committee 8 – Customer Service inquire into and report on pounds in New South Wales and FOWAS will refer to all items (a) to (k) in this submission.
 - (a) As private organisations withdrawn from animal welfare efforts, state and local governments play a pivotal role in maintaining and enhancing these facilities. Governments should be open to collaborating with charitable organisations to maximise the impact of the combined efforts. Councils need to have a well-defined forecasted plan that accounts for expansion of services as areas grow and show transparency in funding allocation and decision-making processes to build trust within the community.
 - (b) Facilities need to meet essential regulated standards of care and be located in an appropriate area. Often shelters are built in the worse and unacceptable locations. All shelters need to be put under the spotlight to ensure that they are following essential animal welfare codes.
 - (c) Addressing these areas requires a collaborative approach. Government should allocate adequate funds for animal welfare facilities. Staff should be trained and continued to be so during the employment within this environment. Also educating the the public about responsible pet ownership should be included in this mix.
 - (d) From FOWAS experience with our local shelter, these codes and laws including WSC Alternatives to Euthanasia policy have been flouted in the past and present. Unless a form of a regulatory body is setup, providing trained inspectors, to drop in unannounced for spot checks, then these current laws and codes will continue to be ignored.
 - (e) Factors of animals ending up in shelters could be assisted by raising awareness about the consequences of overbreeding and the importance of pet ownership. Educating the public about the benefits of adopting from shelters/rescues, rather than buying from pet stores who could be supporting puppy/kitten mills or backyard breeders. This could help reduce demand for animals from unethical sources. Implementing stricter penalties for backyard breeders and puppy/kitten mills. Stronger regulation of pet stores, that require transparency about the origin and conditions of where a pet was purchased from. Investing in spaying/neutering programs especially discounted programs for low-income members of the public. Advocate for and support legislation that addresses overpopulation of animals and unethical breeding practices.
 - (f) Euthanasia rates and practices in NSW need a major overhaul. Without rates being reported correctly there are no true guidelines on how to reduce euthanasia rates. Update legislation to mandate accurate reporting of euthanasia practices by both shelters and veterinary partitioners can provide an important foundation for accountability. Implement standardised methods of data collection. As mentioned in our background FOWAS did before the council went into administration have an alternative solution to euthanasia. This policy has worked well for our local shire and if a charity was not available to support this initiative a council could project funds to allow for this.

Shelters should prioritise thorough behavioural and health assessments to determine if an animal can be adopted. WAS now has only one staff member who is qualified to perform a behavioural test on dogs. Prior to administration of WSC there were always 2 staff who were able to do this role. This should be mandatory regulation across all shelters. Veterinary practitioners should also comment not just on the health status of a dog but its behaviours. If the dog does not pass its mandatory testing within a holding period, an external qualified behaviouralist should also assess the dog. These procedures would enable every possible chance to find the dog a new home and reduce euthanasia rates.

- (g) As mentioned in (f) behavioural testing needs to be undertaken by a fully trained and qualified person. To address behavioural testing, it should be conducted by more than one-person multiple times. There needs to be collaboration between shelters, trainers, veterinarians, and behaviorists to have an accurate assessment. Effective behaviour strategies should also be in place. It is a complex process that needs strong guidelines to ensure the right outcome.
- (h) Fostering good relations between all these parties should be a priority to help rehome animals. Collaborating with rescue organisations can result in resource sharing, such as training, medical care and foster homes. Rescue organisations help to reduce the burden on shelters, freeing up resources and space to accommodate more animals in need. Fortunately, WAS has a strong relationship with rescue organisations which has been very helpful in successfully rehoming specialised breeds that end up in the shelter. WAS does not have fostering within their model. FOWAS covers transportation and related expenses which alleviates the financial burden for both the shelter and the rescue organisations, making it easier to transport animals to suitable homes.
- (i) Suggestions could include education of the public, a cat de-sexing program run by councils for members of the public to access, well before a breeding season. FOWAS has collaborated with WSC and WAS in 2015 to run a desexing program “Mossy Moggies” which was for lower income pensions etc to assess the program in the village of Moss Vale. Council received a grant from NSW Government for the program and FOWAS paid for the microchips and assisted council in publicising the program. We hope to be able to run this program again with council once the administration is finished in September 2023.
- (j) Strategies could include investing in the education and training of shelter staff ensures that they are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to provide proper care for the animals. Training should include animal behaviour, positive reinforcement techniques and addressing specific needs of animals. Staff should be trained in basic medical care and recognise when veterinary attention is required. Regular unannounced facility inspections by third parties. Reporting to a centralised body within NSW Government.
- (k) Legislation on its own may not lead to the desired outcomes if there isn't a robust system in place to oversee compliance and take appropriate action against violations. Collaboration between animal welfare organisations, law enforcement agencies and government bodies can enhance the effectiveness of enforcement efforts. Provide protection for individuals to report violations. Educating the public is always the number one priority.

FOWAS would be happy to discuss anything raised in our submission.