

**Submission
No 122**

INQUIRY INTO POUNDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Animal Welfare League NSW

Date Received: 22 August 2023



Submission for Inquiry into Pounds in New South Wales

22 August 2023

1. Introduction

The Animal Welfare League NSW (AWL NSW) is a leading animal welfare organisation founded in 1958. AWL NSW welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Legislative Council Portfolio Committee 8 – Customer Service inquiry into Pounds in New South Wales.

AWL NSW rehomes more than 3,000 unwanted companion animals each year. Our rates of euthanasia are amongst the lowest of any shelter in the country.

Our level of care for animals is unparalleled, with dogs being exercised 4 times per day at our Kemps Creek Shelter and high animal attendant-to-animal ratios. We have a veterinary hospital, and our inspectorate team helps enforce the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (POCTAA) and the Companion Animals Act 1988 (CAA).

We are a rehoming organisation and not a traditional pound. We are primarily funded by generous donors and benefactors.

AWL NSW has 21 branches across New South Wales that rescue, foster and adopt surrendered animals. These branches are primarily run by a team of dedicated volunteers.

Community expectations of pounds have changed markedly in recent years. Rightly, the community expects better treatment of impounded animals and lower rates of euthanasia. These expectations are placing traditional pound models under pressure. There is little doubt that pounds have improved from what they were a decade ago but some still fall short.

The biggest challenge confronting pounds, under changing expectations, is operational costs. As a rehoming organisation, we fully appreciate the costs of placing an animal in a new loving home. As more pounds move to a rehoming model (which is likely) the financial costs will be significant not just for infrastructure but for operations.

While this inquiry is focussed on pounds, the solutions to fixing pounds goes far beyond the pounds themselves. New models of pound operation need to be explored but so too do measures to avert burgeoning companion animal populations due to low rates of desexing, animal neglect through lack of medical care and food, and cruelty and abandonment.

The Parliament should be congratulated on undertaking such an inquiry. It certainly is a step in the right direction. We appreciate that it will take time to address these problems but the longer we wait the greater the gap between community expectations and the level of service they are receiving.

2. Terms of Reference

That Portfolio Committee 8 – Customer Service inquire into and report on pounds in New South Wales, and in particular:

- (a) resourcing challenges affecting New South Wales pounds, including the adequacy of funding given towards the operation of pounds by local and state governments
- (b) the adequacy of pound buildings and facilities in New South Wales
- (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
- (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
- (e) factors influencing the number of animals ending up in New South Wales pounds, and strategies for reducing these numbers
- (f) euthanasia rates and practices in New South Wales pounds, including the adequacy of reporting of euthanasia rates and other statistics
- (g) the role and challenges of behavioural assessments in New South Wales pounds
- (h) the relationship between New South Wales pounds and animal rescue organisations
- (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
- (j) strategies for improving the treatment, care and outcomes for animals in New South Wales pounds
- (k) any other related matter

3. Recommendations

In response to the terms of reference, this submission makes the following recommendations, listed in relation to the relevant terms of reference (TOR):

TOR (a) Resourcing challenges:

Recommendation 1. Examine new operating models for pounds to ensure activities meet community expectations.

Recommendation 2. Explore ways to outsource elements of pound operations such as rehoming and adoption that will assist in delivering value for money to taxpayers.

Recommendation 3. Build new partnerships with rehoming organisations, and strengthen existing partnerships.

Recommendation 4. Prepare a benchmark reporting system for pounds that is available to the public. Ultimately, performance relative to benchmarks should be linked to State Government funding.

TOR (b) Pound buildings and facilities:

Recommendation 5. Prepare a state-wide strategy for pounds with the aim of creating a regional hub and spoke system.

Recommendation 6. Explore ways to fund the development of new pound infrastructure, especially in regional and remote areas.

Recommendation 7. Work towards providing multipurpose design guidelines for the construction of new pounds.

TOR (d) Adequacy of the laws, regulations and codes:

Recommendation 8. Conduct a review of the Animal Welfare Code of Practice no 5 and the Companion Animals Act to ensure that they are contemporaneous and meet high community expectations.

Recommendation 9. Extend community education programs specifically related to the Companion Animals Act 1988.

Recommendation 10. Review penalties for non-compliance with the Companion Animals Act 1988 and POCTAA to deter substandard animal care.

Recommendation 11. Consider the establishment of an Animal Welfare Taskforce, involving State and Local Government, animal rehoming organisations, veterinarians, and pounds to oversee improvement in animal welfare outcomes and rejuvenation of pounds.

TOR (e) Numbers of animals in pounds:

Recommendation 12. Provide significantly more funding on preventative animal welfare measures to reduce surrender demand and animal abandonment.

Recommendation 13. Leverage additional NSW Government funds for companion animal desexing and veterinary costs for low-income households.

Recommendation 14. Implement changes to the Veterinary Practice Act 2003 to enable approved mobile veterinary trucks to undertake desexing and emergency procedures, especially in regional and remote communities.

Recommendation 15. Work with animal welfare groups to develop a rational regulatory system and provide additional funds for community cat management.

TOR (f) Euthanasia rates and practices:

Recommendation 16. Active collaboration between the State Government and Councils that have high rates of euthanasia to develop plans of management and financial support to improve outcomes. This could be undertaken in conjunction with Recommendation 6.

Recommendation 17. In conjunction with recommendation 12, deliver expert multi-disciplinary advice to pounds to help improve animal welfare outcomes in areas of most need.

Recommendation 18. Significantly improve pound and animal welfare datasets to provide rational, credible, and transparent information on performance. This will also involve developing consistent concepts, sources and methods for collection and collation.

TOR (g) Behavioural assessments:

Recommendation 19. Ensure all pounds have access to trained animal behavioural specialists; this may involve providing training to existing pound staff or arranging access to an outsourced behaviouralist.

Recommendation 20. Provide disclosure of behaviouralist observations on each animal journey going through to rehoming organisations, rescue groups, veterinarians, or adopters.

TOR (h) Pounds and rescue organisations:

Recommendation 21. Further strengthen relationships between rescue groups and pounds by providing an annual workshop to discuss matters of mutual interest. This should be co-ordinated through the Office of Local Government.

4. Response to the Terms of Reference

The following commentary responds to all terms of reference, except TOR (c) as that is a matter for Local Government and pounds, and TOR (i) which is covered in other sections.

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

There is little doubt that Councils that run pounds face challenges in adequately resourcing them. Community expectations have shifted over recent years making resourcing to meet higher expectations of service delivery even more challenging.

Urban communities particularly do not support euthanasia for convenience and there is increasing support for the ‘Getting to Zero’ movement. There are significant financial implications involved in the transformation of the operations of pounds to meet these burgeoning expectations.

AWL NSW is a highly experienced rehoming organisation with widespread community support. We are closely aligned with the trajectory of general community expectations in this area and understand the direct economic costs of running a full-time animal shelter.

Financial Issues

In 2021/22 the costs of providing services per animal in our shelter were as follows:

Table 1: Average AWL NSW Shelter Cost per Animal per Year 2021-22*

	Dog	Cat
Nett Shelter Expenses	\$1,837.23	\$898.31
Nett Vet Expenses	\$1,342.53	\$656.42
Nett Inspectorate	\$507.57	\$248.17
Other	\$360.05	\$176.05
TOTAL	\$4,047.38	\$1,978.95

*The table above does not include administrative and overhead expenses.

The table indicates that the average cost to the organisation for a dog surrender is \$4,047, and \$1,979 for a cat. This cost is considerably higher than that of euthanising an animal. If pounds shift to an animal welfare model, the financial implications are therefore substantial. As they decrease euthanasia rates, they will encounter increased financial pressures in moving toward a shelter outcome.

AWL NSW has just developed a new three-year corporate strategic plan. As part of that process, new ways of service delivery were explored to provide financial sustainability to the operations of the business. It was found that fostering through our branch network was the most resource and cost-effective means of managing animal rehoming.

The table below outlines those costs:

Table 2: Average AWL NSW Foster Cost per Animal per Year 2021-22

	Dog	Cat
External Vet Fees	\$638.31	\$842.86
Food and Board	\$32.57	\$43.01
Consumables	\$24.21	\$31.97
Other	\$92.19	\$121.73
TOTAL	\$787.28	\$1,039.56

The table above shows that it is considerably cheaper to rehome animals through foster housing than in animal welfare shelters. It should be noted that the savings are largely due to savings in labour costs as fostering is typically undertaken by volunteers.

The purpose of providing this information is to highlight that using traditional pound models, like shelters, to meet community expectations will add more financial strain on a Council. Some pounds are moving towards a rehoming model, but it is uncertain if Council pounds will have the deep networks of community groups to offer extensive foster services to alleviate resourcing pressures.

As it stands, some pounds are already passing animals to rehoming organisations to avoid costs. As the figures clearly show this may be unsustainable for a rehoming organisation if the animal requires shelter accommodation. At present, 10% of animals in AWL NSW's shelter are from pounds and this is crowding out animal surrenders from the public.

The resourcing challenges are material not only for pounds but also for rehoming organisations. New operating models need to be explored to ensure taxpayers receive value for money and community expectations regarding animal welfare are met. Across the globe there has been a movement towards more shelter-based models (especially in the US). Additional funds from State and Local Governments will be required to support new operating models.

A more concerted effort should be made to facilitate collaboration between pounds and animal welfare organisations to help leverage resources and expertise that can deliver improved and more cost-effective animal welfare outcomes. Also, rehoming organisations are generally in a better position to enlist volunteers which makes their operations more affordable than Councils.

Generally, animal welfare organisations have good relations with pounds and so do local rescue groups. But that relationship is often based around the animal welfare organisation accepting animals from a pound. There is an opportunity for those relationships to better reflect the costs of providing the service. For example, rehoming organisations might be able to offer more support if they were fully paid for their rehoming services. But right now, the finances don't add up – the more animals an organisation or rescue group takes in, the more money they lose.

Summary:

To start the process, a group should be formed with Local Government, State Government, rehoming organisations and rescue groups to support collaboration and partnerships.

Pounds should promote adoption programs, either through their connections or with rehoming groups. Over recent years, it appears that adoptions through pounds have increased significantly.

Pounds are typically at the bottom of the Local Government's financial food chain. Pounds often have limited funds, and if budgets are tight, animal euthanasia may be used as a way of controlling resources and budgets. Further, looking at euthanasia rates alone is an issue because as pounds start rehoming more frequently (by themselves or through rehoming organisations) they will be left with medically and behaviourally challenged animals and euthanasia rates will appear high.

Better data sets are needed to allow greater scrutiny of operations. With better data, it will be easier to ensure transparency in the allocation of funds to pounds and better manage the performance of their operations. This includes looking beyond euthanasia rates and developing performance measures against agreed standards. Such benchmarks could go outside traditional pound operations and cover areas such as desexing and animals provided to rehoming facilities and rescue groups.

Recommendations:

Recommendation 1.

- Examine new operating models for pounds to ensure activities meet community expectations.

Recommendation 2.

- Explore ways to outsource elements of pound operations such as rehoming and adoption that will assist in delivering value for money to taxpayers.

Recommendation 3.

- Build new partnerships with rehoming organisations, and strengthen existing partnerships.

Recommendation 4.

- Prepare a benchmark reporting system for pounds that is available to the public. Ultimately, performance to benchmarks should be linked to State Government funding.

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

NSW is home to numerous pounds that are responsible for providing shelter, care, and support to lost, stray, and homeless animals. However, a growing concern within the animal welfare community relates to the adequacy of pound buildings and facilities to meet the evolving needs of animal welfare and community expectations.

Pound facilities play a vital role in ensuring the welfare of animals under their care, as well as in promoting responsible pet ownership and rehoming efforts. The following commentary addresses the adequacy of pound buildings and facilities in New South Wales and the implications for animal welfare:

Pound Buildings

Many pounds in New South Wales face infrastructure challenges that hinder their ability to provide optimal care for animals. To enhance pound facilities and manage finances wisely, we need legislative change along with the creation of detailed business plans that include cost estimates.

Outdated buildings, limited space, and lack of modern amenities can lead to overcrowding, poor hygiene, and inadequate isolation areas. Such conditions not only jeopardise the health and well-being of animals but also contribute to stress and behavioural issues. For example, Bega Pound is located on the Bega Valley Shire Council waste site. There are other examples of pounds where parvovirus and other pernicious animal diseases flourish.

There are also examples of modern pound facilities such as the Blacktown Animal Rehoming Centre – where more than \$7M was spent creating a state-of-the-art facility.

Generally, the pounds that face the most challenges are in regional and rural areas. These places often have small tax bases and high numbers of pet owners, making it hard to raise funds for building new facilities. The State Government could help by providing extra funding for new pound structures in these areas.

Furthermore, there doesn't seem to be a clear plan for where pounds should be located or how resources could be shared. Some Councils, like Blacktown and Hornsby, offer pound services to neighbouring areas. These agreements are usually made between individual Councils, but there isn't an overall strategy to make sure pounds are placed where they'll be most effective and provide good value for both the local ratepayers and the State Government.

A more efficient way of delivering services may be to create a Regional Rehoming Facility using the local pound as a short-term holding facility – where behaviour is assessed, and veterinary health is checked before moving appropriate animals to the Rehoming Facility.

Building Design

The design of pound facilities should incorporate elements that promote the mental and physical well-being of animals. Adequate space for exercise, socialisation, and enrichment activities is essential to prevent boredom and anxiety, especially for animals with longer stays.

We understand that while pounds comply with the Companions Animals Act (CAA) those are minimum standards. In many areas there is neither the staff or the space to provide the enrichment and exercise required to provide adequate levels of animal welfare.

Some further design considerations should include:

Staff and Volunteer Well-being: Pound facilities must consider the well-being of staff and volunteers who care for the animals. Safe hygienic working conditions are crucial to maintain the morale and dedication of those who work directly for animal welfare.

Community Engagement: Pounds should ideally function as community hubs for animal welfare education and engagement. Adequate facilities can support programs such as adoption events, training sessions, and workshops, fostering a stronger bond between the community and animals in need.

Alignment with Contemporary Practices: The design and layout of pound facilities should align with modern animal welfare practices. This includes separate areas for various animal types (cats, dogs, small animals), proper ventilation and lighting, efficient waste management systems, and advanced medical and quarantine areas.

Regional Disparities: Regional and rural areas often face unique challenges due to limited resources and funding constraints. Ensuring that pound facilities in these areas are adequately equipped to meet the needs of animals can be more challenging.

Summary:

Addressing the inadequacies in pound buildings and facilities requires a collaborative effort involving Local and State Governments, animal welfare organisations, and communities.

Adequate funding, strategic planning, and a commitment to modernising and improving pound infrastructure are essential steps toward ensuring that animals in pounds receive the care and support they deserve.

Ultimately, the adequacy of pound buildings and facilities directly impacts the overall well-being of animals and the effectiveness of animal welfare efforts. It is imperative that stakeholders work together to develop solutions that prioritise the health, safety, and welfare of animals in pounds across New South Wales.

Recommendations:

Recommendation 5.

- Prepare a state-wide strategy for pounds with the aim of creating a regional hub and spoke system.

Recommendation 6.

- Explore ways to fund the development of new pound infrastructure, especially in regional and remote areas.

Recommendation 7.

- Work towards providing multipurpose design guidelines for the construction of new pounds.

(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 Companion Animals Act 1998 (NSW), the NSW Animal Welfare Code of Practice No 5 – Dogs and Cats in Animal Boarding Establishments (1996), and related regulations play a crucial role in setting the standards and guidelines for the operation of pounds and the treatment of animals in their care. Both the Companion Animals Act 1998 and the Code of Practice require a review specifically concerning pounds.

The NSW Animal Welfare Code of Practice No 5 was first published in October 1996. In the 27 years since publication, societal expectations have shifted towards better animal welfare and rehoming instead of euthanasia. Those in charge of enforcing these standards have similar expectations.

Although the Companion Animals Act includes sections related to pounds, AWL NSW Inspectors do not enforce this law. Currently, the AWL NSW Inspectorate mostly responds to complaints about pounds from the public, and Inspectors investigate these reports. The Code of Practice allows for both this reactive approach and a more preferred proactive one. To shift to proactive inspections, more Inspectors would be needed.

Below is a breakdown of AWL NSW's proactive inspections, reactive inspections, and investigations into council pounds.

Financial Year	Proactive	Reactive	Investigation
2018-2019	0	2	5
2019-2020	0	8	2
2020-2021	0	4	2
2021-2022	1	3	2
2022-2023	1	3	1

Investigations usually focus on the animals' treatment and welfare, their living conditions in the pound, and the medical care for sick or injured animals. Pounds typically cooperate with Inspectors to fix any problems. Enforcement action is rare.

The adequacy of laws, regulations, and codes governing New South Wales pounds is of paramount importance in ensuring the welfare and protection of animals in these facilities.

Below are AWL NSW's comments on the adequacy of these legal frameworks and the current enforcement and compliance regime:

Companion Animals Act 1998 (NSW): While the Companion Animals Act provides a legal framework for the management of companion animals, including those in pounds, AWL NSW believes that the Act could be enhanced to address several areas. These include the need for clearer guidelines on animal welfare standards in pounds, provisions for the mental and behavioural well-being of animals, and a comprehensive approach to responsible pet ownership education.

NSW Animal Welfare Code of Practice No 5: The Code of Practice No 5 provides guidance on the treatment of dogs and cats in animal boarding establishments, including pounds. However, given the evolving understanding of animal welfare science and best practices, there is a need to update and modernise this code to reflect the latest knowledge and advancements in animal care. Additionally, expanding the code to encompass a wider range of species and addressing specific issues faced by pounds could enhance its effectiveness.

Adequacy of Enforcement and Compliance Regime: AWL NSW recognises that enforcement and compliance are integral to ensuring that pounds adhere to the established legal frameworks. However, the current enforcement and compliance regime could benefit from improvements. AWL NSW suggests:

- Strengthening penalties for non-compliance to act as a deterrent against substandard animal care.
- Establishing regular, unannounced inspections by regulatory bodies to monitor pound operations and animal welfare standards.
- Providing dedicated resources and training for inspectors to ensure effective assessment and enforcement.
- Enhancing transparency through public reporting of inspection findings and outcomes.
- Facilitating collaboration between pounds, animal welfare organisations, and veterinary professionals to share best practices and address challenges.

Modernisation and Collaboration: AWL NSW encourages a collaborative approach involving relevant stakeholders, including animal welfare organisations, veterinarians, Local Governments, and community members, to review and update the laws, regulations, and codes governing pounds. Modernising these frameworks to incorporate current knowledge on animal behaviour, welfare science, and best practices will better address the evolving needs of animals in pounds and the community.

Education and Training: To ensure the effective implementation of updated laws and codes, AWL NSW suggests investing in training programs for pound staff, volunteers, and Local Government officials. These programs should focus on animal care, behaviour, handling, and relevant legal requirements.

Summary:

AWL NSW acknowledges the role of existing laws, regulations, and codes in governing New South Wales pounds. While these frameworks provide a foundation for animal welfare, there is a need for ongoing review, modernisation, and collaboration to address emerging challenges and align with the best interests of the animals in our care.

AWL NSW advocates for a comprehensive and compassionate approach to animal welfare that reflects the evolving understanding of animals' needs and encourages responsible pet ownership.

Recommendations:

Recommendation 8.

- Conduct a review of the Animal Welfare Code of Practice no 5 and the Companion Animals Act to ensure that they are contemporaneous and meet higher community expectations.

Recommendation 9.

- Extend community education programs specifically related to the Companion Animals Act 1988.

Recommendation 10.

- Review penalties for non-compliance with the Companion Animals Act 1988 and POCTAA to deter substandard animal care.

Recommendation 11.

- Consider the establishment of an Animal Welfare Taskforce, involving State and Local Government, animal rehoming organisations, veterinarians and pounds to oversee improvement in animal welfare outcomes and rejuvenation of pounds.

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

The number of animals ending up in New South Wales pounds is influenced by a complex interplay of various factors. AWL NSW recognises the importance of addressing these factors through a multi-faceted approach to reduce the influx of animals into pounds.

There has been a unique confluence of events that has impacted over recent years on animal surrender and pound numbers.

The First Wave

COVID was a time when many people sought animal companionship. Rates of animal ownership increased significantly over this time – especially dogs. People were working from home and were constantly around their new pets. When the threat of COVID retreated, people returned to work causing issues with animal care when the animals were left alone all day. Surrender inquiries rose significantly as people returned to work.

The Second Wave

As surrenders kept surging after COVID, cost of living pressures started to take hold. Increasing rents and mortgages saw households wanting to downsize to alternative accommodation which in many cases was not suitable for companion animals. On top of the COVID surge a bigger wave of surrenders from downsizing occurred.

The Third Wave

Related to the second wave and cost of living was recent increases in veterinary charges. This has been complicated by the type of pets chosen by owners during the first wave.

Both the increase in veterinary charges and the preference for exotic dog breeds during COVID have led to a surge in the surrender of these animals. More of these dogs are being seen in shelters, and the trend is expected to continue in pounds as well. Over the past two years, the sharp rise in veterinary costs has become a significant reason for people surrendering their pets.

These three waves have been experienced acutely by the AWL NSW Shelter. While there is some responsibility on the part of the owners who wish to surrender their animals, similar pressures are likely also being felt by pounds.

Some additional reasons for animals being placed in pounds include:

Lack of Understanding of Responsible Pet Ownership: A significant number of animals enter pounds due to irresponsible ownership practices, including failure to desex pets, inadequate training, and insufficient containment. This may be due to lack of community education.

Limited Veterinary Care Access: Limited access to affordable veterinary care can result in preventable health issues, leading to pet owners relinquishing animals to pounds.

Breeding Practices and Overpopulation: Uncontrolled breeding contributes to the overpopulation of animals, which leads to unwanted litters being surrendered to pounds.

Homelessness and Transient Population: Homelessness and transient living situations can result in animals being abandoned or surrendered to pounds due to lack of housing options that allow pets.

Displacement from Natural Disasters and Emergencies: During natural disasters and emergencies, animals may be displaced, and owners may be unable to care for them temporarily.

AWL NSW has a history of implementing strategies to try to reduce the number of animals in pounds. This is largely funded by our donors and benefactors. The value of investing in preventative measures cannot be overstated with respect to companion animals as lack of action can create exponential increases in animal populations in a very short space of time.

Companion Animal Desexing Scheme (CADS) and Companion Animal Assistance Scheme (CAAS)

Every year, AWL NSW allocates \$1.2 million to provide assistance to low-income households with pets.

The Companion Animal Desexing Scheme (CADS) offers financial assistance to low-income households for desexing their pets. We recognise that other organisations might receive funding for similar programs from local Councils or substantial Local Government grants. As the animal welfare organisation with the largest regional reach across NSW and a proven track record, we are well-positioned to expand our efforts.

Local and State Government funds should be provided to support a coordinated and greatly expanded desexing program for companion animals through animal welfare organisations. With additional support, we could work with local councils and veterinarians to increase animal desexing services across the state, thereby alleviating further pressures on pounds.

AWL NSW also offers a Companion Animal Assistance Scheme (CAAS), a self-funded program that provides financial assistance for emergency veterinary care to low-income households. With the increase in veterinary fees and the cost-of-living crisis, this scheme could be considered to help keep vet costs affordable for those with lower incomes.

Animal Care Truck

AWL NSW operates the world's largest Animal Care Truck, equipped to perform a wide array of veterinary procedures, including desexings and surgeries. This truck can also be deployed during natural disasters.

Supported by the NSW State Government, AWL NSW has successfully provided health checks, vaccinations, and microchipping in rural and remote areas across NSW. However, due to its mobile nature, the truck is not licensed to offer its full range of services. With a change in legislation, this innovative resource could extend desexing services to regional and remote communities that lack veterinary care, helping to prevent animals from ending up in pounds.

Community Cat Management

Typically, shelters and pounds experience kitten seasons from spring to mid-summer. However, over the past two years, there has been an atypical, overwhelming demand for cat surrenders all year round.

Research in Australia by Prof. Jacque Rand has shown that community cat management programs can effectively reduce surrender demand. A successful example of this is the Campus Cats program at the University of New South Wales, led by Prof. Helen Swarbrick and Colleen Ringe.

As part of its new strategy, AWL NSW plans to launch a community cat management pilot program. This will be in line with existing laws and will focus only on owned cats. The program will include desexing, microchipping, and vaccinating the cats, as well as tracking and monitoring specific colony numbers.

Although AWL NSW will fund the initial proof of concept, ongoing Local and State Government support will be necessary if the program is successful. We would happily work with pounds in identified areas.

Programs like this are essential to manage the demand for surrenders and provide improved animal welfare outcomes.

Other strategies for reducing the number of animals in pounds include:

Community Outreach, Education and Engagement: Foster partnerships with local communities, businesses, and schools to raise awareness about responsible pet ownership, including training, socialisation, awareness of the commitment required to care for a pet, and the importance of pets as valued family members.

Collaboration with Veterinarians: Partner with veterinary clinics to offer affordable vaccination clinics, health checks, and preventive care services to underserved communities.

Rehoming and Adoption Initiatives: Develop innovative adoption programs, including open adoption policies, offsite adoption events, and online platforms, to increase the rate of successful adoptions.

Support for Pet-Friendly Housing: Collaborate with housing providers to create pet-friendly housing options for individuals and families, reducing the likelihood of pets being surrendered due to housing issues.

Recommendations:

Recommendation 12.

- Provide significantly more funding for preventative animal welfare measures to reduce surrender demand and animal abandonment.

Recommendation 13.

- Leverage additional NSW State Government funds for companion animal desexing and affordable veterinary costs for low-income households.

Recommendation 14.

- Implement changes to the Veterinary Practice Act 2003 to enable approved mobile veterinary trucks to undertake desexing and emergency procedures, especially in regional and remote communities.

Recommendation 15.

- Work with animal welfare groups to develop a rational regulatory system and provide additional funds for community cat management.

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

The Office of Local Government engaged the Centre for International Economics (CIE) to review rehoming practices. The review was conducted using 2019-20 data. Their report provides a comprehensive review on pound practices in NSW.

In 2019-20 there were 65,386 animals impounded.

Of those:

- 47.6% (31,124) were sold or rehomed.
- 24.3% (15,889) were reclaimed.
- 28.1% (18,373) were euthanised.

(Ref: CIE, Rehoming of Companion Animals NSW Draft Report, September 2022 p2).

While it appears there has been significant improvement over historical performance (especially in terms of numbers sold or rehomed) much more needs to be done to reduce rates of euthanasia.

In a further analysis, AWL NSW interrogated pound source data publicly available from OLG for 2019-20. Our analysis has some unexpected results, likely resulting from inconsistent reporting and varying practices across the state. The information we gathered is a general illustration, and the quality of the data should be kept in mind when interpreting it. For more accurate results, there should ideally be uniform concepts, sources, and methods for data collection.

AWL NSW created a ranking system to identify animal welfare hotspots using OLG data. The number of animals euthanised was calculated as a percentage of all incoming animals at each pound and was separated into categories for cats and dogs. Pounds were then ranked based on euthanasia rates for both animals. The ranks for cats and dogs were added together and divided by 2 to provide an overall rank. Using this method, and considering data limitations, the top fifty animal welfare hotspots were determined.

Top 50 Animal Welfare Hotspots - NSW LGAs Ranked

(1 is the highest area of need, 50 comparatively the lowest)

1. Tenterfield Shire Council	26. Temora Shire Council
2. Berrigan Shire Council	27. Oberon Council
3. Warren Shire Council	28. Willoughby City Council
4. Coolamon Shire Council	29. Gunnedah Shire Council
5. Bourke Shire Council	30. Bega Valley Shire Council
6. Lachlan Shire Council	31. Dubbo Regional Council
7. Gwydir Shire Council	32. Tamworth Regional Council
8. Central Darling Shire Council	33. Wollondilly Shire Council
9. Moree Plains Shire Council	34. Weddin Shire Council
10. Burwood Council	35. Cowra Shire Council
11. Walgett Shire Council	36. Armidale Regional Council
12. Strathfield Municipal Council	37. Greater Hume Shire Council
13. Bogan Shire Council	38. Narrabri Shire Council
14. Brewarrina Shire Council	39. Woollahra Municipal Council
15. Port Stephens Council	40. Orange City Council
16. Cobar Shire Council	41. Gilgandra Shire Council
17. Parkes Shire Council	42. Penrith City Council
18. Narrandera Shire Council	43. North Sydney Council
19. Federation Council	44. Albury City Council
20. Hornsby, The Council of the Shire of	45. Cumberland Council
21. Ryde City Council	46. Hawkesbury City Council
22. City of Parramatta Council	47. Tweed Shire Council
23. Inverell Shire Council	48. Blacktown City Council
24. Coonamble Shire Council	49. Wollongong City Council
25. Leeton Shire Council	50. Mid-Western Regional Council

AWL NSW acknowledges the importance of ensuring humane treatment for all animals. It is critical to promote transparency in reporting euthanasia rates and related statistics, because euthanasia rates and practices greatly affect animal welfare.

Here are our thoughts on the euthanasia rates, methods, and sufficiency of reporting:

Euthanasia Rates and Welfare: AWL NSW is concerned about high euthanasia rates as they point to issues like animal overpopulation, limited resources, and difficulties in rehoming. AWL NSW recognises the ethical responsibility to minimise euthanasia rates while prioritising the welfare of animals in pounds.

Transparency and Reporting: Transparent reporting of euthanasia rates and related statistics is crucial for accountability and to understand the progress made in reducing euthanasia numbers. AWL NSW supports efforts to establish standardised reporting mechanisms that provide accurate data on the reasons for euthanasia, including medical conditions, behavioural issues, and lack of available homes.

Alternatives to Euthanasia: AWL NSW urges pounds to consider other options such as adoption programs, collaborations with rescue groups, foster care networks, and behaviour training, and encourages strategies to enhance rehoming possibilities.

Public Education: Educating the public about the importance of adopting, fostering, and responsible pet ownership can contribute to reducing euthanasia rates. AWL NSW supports educational campaigns that promote the benefits of adoption and the impact of responsible pet ownership on animal welfare.

Collaboration and Resource Allocation: Collaboration between pounds, animal welfare organisations, Local Governments, and veterinary professionals is essential to address the root causes of high euthanasia rates. Adequate funding and resource allocation can enhance the capacity of pounds to provide care and rehoming opportunities.

Behavioural and Medical Assessment: Thorough behavioural and medical assessments are crucial in determining whether an animal is suitable for adoption. AWL NSW advocates for the utilisation of qualified professionals to assess an animal's behavioural and medical needs, ensuring accurate decision-making regarding euthanasia.

Research and Data Analysis: Comprehensive research and data analysis are necessary to understand trends and factors contributing to euthanasia rates. AWL NSW supports initiatives that analyse data to identify patterns, challenges, and opportunities for improvement.

Summary:

Stakeholders can work together to reduce euthanasia rates and prioritise animal welfare by emphasising collaboration, education, alternative rehoming options, and thorough data analysis.

State and Local Government funding to build the capacity of rescue organisations could also assist in rehoming more animals from regional pounds.

Recommendations:

Recommendation 16.

- Active collaboration between the State Government and Councils that have high rates of euthanasia to develop plans of management and financial support to improve outcomes. This could be undertaken in conjunction with Recommendation 6.

Recommendation 17.

- In conjunction with recommendation 12, deliver expert multi-disciplinary advice to pounds to help improve animal welfare outcomes in areas of most need.

Recommendation 18.

- Significantly improve pound and animal welfare datasets to provide rational, credible and transparent information on performance. This will also involve developing consistent concepts, sources and methods for collection and collation.

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

Behavioural assessments are vital for animal welfare and successful rehoming in New South Wales pounds and shelters.

AWL NSW emphasises the importance of these assessments in evaluating an animal's temperament and suitability for adoption. These assessments should be carried out by trained professionals to ensure public safety, enhance animal well-being, and foster responsible adoptions.

There is a lack of trained behavioural specialists (whether vets or animal attendants) available to pounds, and if more rehoming is planned, access to these specialists is crucial. Additionally, these specialists cannot merely make brief visits, as they generally need to observe an animal's behaviour over time.

Here are our comments on the issue of behavioural assessments:

Importance of Behavioural Assessments: Behavioural assessments provide valuable insights into an animal's behaviour, temperament, and potential compatibility with prospective adopters. These assessments contribute to informed decision-making regarding the animal's rehoming prospects, ensuring a positive adoption experience for both the animal and the adopter.

Welfare-Centric Approach: AWL NSW advocates for a welfare-centric approach in conducting behavioural assessments. It is essential to ensure that assessments are conducted in a stress-free and respectful manner, taking into consideration the animal's emotional state and comfort.

Matching Animals with Suitable Homes: Effective behavioural assessments assist in matching animals with homes that align with their individual needs, behaviours, and lifestyles. AWL NSW encourages pounds to tailor assessments to identify an animal's strengths and potential areas of improvement, helping potential adopters make informed decisions.

Challenges in Conducting Assessments: Conducting behavioural assessments in pounds can pose challenges due to factors such as stress, unfamiliar environments, and limited resources. AWL NSW recognizes these challenges and supports the implementation of assessment protocols that minimise stress and promote accurate evaluations.

Behaviour Modification: Behavioural assessments can identify animals that may benefit from behaviour modification interventions. AWL NSW emphasises the importance of implementing behaviour modification plans to address behavioural issues and improve an animal's adoptability while ensuring their well-being.

Inconsistent Interpretation: Challenges arise when interpreting assessment results, as different assessors may interpret behaviours differently. AWL NSW recommends establishing clear assessment guidelines and providing training to assessors to ensure consistency and accuracy in evaluations.

Resource Allocation: Conducting thorough behavioural assessments requires adequate resources, including trained staff, time, and appropriate facilities. AWL NSW advocates for allocating resources to support the consistent implementation of behavioural assessments across pounds.

Communication and Collaboration: Collaboration between pounds, veterinary professionals, behaviourists, and animal welfare organisations is crucial in addressing behavioural challenges. Effective communication ensures that animals receive the necessary care, training, and support to improve their adoptability.

Adoption Preparation: Behavioural assessments contribute to preparing adopters for the unique characteristics and needs of the animals they choose to adopt. AWL NSW supports initiatives that provide adopters with accurate information to promote successful and lasting adoptions.

Recommendations:

Recommendation 19.

- Ensure all pounds have access to trained animal behavioural specialists; this may involve providing training to existing pound staff or arranging access to an outsourced behaviouralist.

Recommendation 20.

- Provide disclosure of behaviouralist observations on each animal journey going through to rehoming organisations, rescue groups, veterinarians, or adopters.

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

The relationship between pounds and animal rescue organisations is critical to ensure good outcomes for all animals in need of rehoming.

NSW has more than 30 approved animal rescue organisations that provide an important support service for rehoming pound animals. The rehoming organisations are community-spirited groups and range from having paid staff to being run by dedicated volunteers. Many rescue organisations are currently operating at full capacity. They face many challenges including dealing with cat overpopulation, managing community cats, working with limited resources, facing a shortage of community education on responsible pet ownership, and coping with the high cost of animal health services.

AWL NSW has noticed that, in some isolated instances, pounds have tried to offload animals that are not suitable for rehoming to rehoming organisations. If AWL NSW rejects an animal, pounds may then try other rescue organisations. To avoid potential risks to the public and assist rehoming organisations a master list should be created detailing each animal seeking rehoming, including documentation about behaviour and previous rehoming attempts.

Summary:

Many of the preventative measures recommended in this submission will help manage pound demand but will also assist rescue and rehoming organisations.

Resources need to be devoted to comprehensive desexing programs, community cat management, public education, and access to affordable basic veterinary services especially for low-income households.

The relationship between New South Wales pounds and animal rescue organisations is a vital component of the animal welfare landscape. AWL NSW recognises the significance of this collaboration in promoting the welfare and successful rehoming of animals.

Recommendations:

Recommendation 21.

- Further strengthen relationships between rescue groups and pounds by providing an annual workshop to discuss matters of mutual interest. This should be co-ordinated through the Office of Local Government.

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

Throughout this AWL NSW submission, we have suggested strategies that we believe will improve the treatment, care and outcomes for animals in New South Wales.

There are 21 recommendations provided as part of this submission. We encourage the Committee to review all our recommendations.

The recommendations encompass:

- Strategy
- Staff Training and Development
- Affordable Veterinary Care and Support
- Behavioural Assessments
- Collaboration
- Adoption and Rehoming
- Programs to Relieve Demand
- Transparent Reporting, Monitoring and Evaluation

AWL NSW is dedicated to enhancing the welfare of animals in New South Wales pounds. By adopting these strategies and fostering a culture of continuous improvement, we can enhance the treatment, care, and outcomes for animals in pounds.

This collaborative state-wide effort can result in higher adoption rates, reduced euthanasia, and the overall enhancement of animal welfare.