

**Submission
No 130**

INQUIRY INTO POUNDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Submission into the Inquiry into Pounds in NSW-
By Jenny Cotterell
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Thank you for allowing me to make this submission to the Inquiry into Pounds in NSW.

My name is Jenny Cotterell, and my background is in Animal Welfare with 10 years working in shelters and pounds along with a further 24 years experience as a qualified Local Government Animal Management Officer in Victoria (2 years casual and 22 years full-time employment).

Having a background in animal welfare, commencing with council assisted me with having a greater understanding of my role in community safety, animal management enforcement and animal welfare, the challenges that are faced daily in the role challenges of rescue groups and other organizations, and most importantly understanding the communities' barriers, in these situations.

Funding

Most councils contract out the pound service for dogs and cats, paying huge costs for a service provided by an animal management facility, to hold and manage their stray, seized, and surrendered animals. While animal management services are being provided, along with costs annually increased by service providers, council budgets are increased to reflect this annually, with not enough thought as to why so many domestic animals are being impounded and looking at funding proactive programs to minimize this. Designated Rehoming Organizations along with residents associated with rescue groups (non-designated organizations), take on healthy treatable animals out of pounds into their facilities or homes for rehoming, paying out of their own pockets for any further expenses of housing, vet work, and feeding ultimately the public are carrying the councils for what they already have budgets to manage.

Recommendation: • **Further allocation of funding is spent on free cat sterilization programs for residents, who own and care for cats in the community, including the cat rescue groups that are not part of the Designated Rehoming Organizations, with no barriers.**

High euthanasia rates for NSW pounds is not a new issue, in fact, it is an old issue with still no resolution.

History shows in 2005, concerns were raised by the World League for the Protection of Animals about the 80,000 cats and dogs killed in NSW pounds and shelters each year. (AAP 2005)

In 2011 there was a strong concern for the number of animals being euthanized, with a statement released by the NSW Minister of Local Government, Don Page who clearly said about one-third of all dogs and 70% of all cats were euthanized each year in NSW pounds and shelters". To try and combat the high euthanasia numbers, there was a task force set up with the Australian Veterinary Association, RSPCA, CPS Pet Industry Association, and Dogs NSW with Local and State Governments. (AAP 2011) In February 2014, a Ministerial Circular started a new \$900,000 local council grant program over three years to target microchipping, registration, and desexing to reduce pet overpopulation, to be introduced in mid-2014, to address community concern about animal welfare and high euthanasia rates.

In September 2022, there was a review of the rehoming practices of companion animals in NSW with a draft recommendation report published for the Office of Local Government, outlining the issues with current practices and strategies to reduce euthanasia. (CIE 2022)

The problem remains the same in 2023, with the killing of healthy treatable companion animals in NSW pounds and shelters. Funding from these consultancies and task forces could have already seen proactive community programs implemented and saved lives.

Recommendation: To immediately implement free sterilisation programs for cats in the community.

Current Compliance and Enforcement

The role of animal management in Local Government has changed considerably, dealing with communities under constant pressure with costs of living increased causing further issues such as mental illness, homelessness, evictions, and domestic violence within communities, most AMOs (Animal Management Officers) work alone each day, attending properties to deal with mostly conflict of some type and resolve the community issues which can be quite dangerous at times. Police members have training for difficult situations and work two up, so why is it okay for AMOs to work one up with very little training, but this is not considered a workplace Occupational Health and Safety issue? Having to deal with added workplace stress of high euthanasia rates across pounds and shelters is detrimental to not only the AMOs, the pound/ shelter staff but the vets who generally carry out this euthanasia. People who work in these roles mostly love animals and want to help them, not kill them, would you want to go to work each day to do this work?

Compassion fatigue created by high euthanasia numbers of dogs and cats is very real in both animal management and animal welfare sectors, yet this is not recognized as a contributor to staff turnover or workplace stress, it is just expected that it will be dealt with and accepted as part of a role, with no further consideration.

There is very limited support in place for AMOs, shelter staff, and vets, when these issues do impact personally, quite often causing individuals' personal trauma

In NSW, it is my understanding that most compliance practices by AMOs revolve around the focus and management of dogs, which can have the greatest impact on immediate community safety in most local government areas (LGA). Dog-related complaint calls to the councils are recorded and followed up, usually in a timely manner, with an understanding of the potential unpredictability of every situation. Dogs and livestock can clearly be sighted by the public, but cats can quite often go unnoticed until there are high numbers, often leaving property owners to seek help or deal with the problem themselves as the pounds and shelters are already at capacity.

Cats do not seem to have the same level of compliance activity administered across NSW by LGAs, as a public perception. Cat-related complaints and calls are mostly not recorded, giving no real measure to the cat-related situations across the State. So how can LGAs make informed decisions and proactively plan for cat-related matters when there is no evidence of what and where these cat-related issues are occurring? We all agree there is a cat overpopulation issue, in most LGAs it is the residents who obtain a cat trap, trap a cat and deliver it to a pound or animal management facility, at the resident's cost. Current LGA compliance and enforcement is generally reactive and only when a complaint is received from a member of the public, this seems to be standard across LGAs even then the level of assistance to the resident varies, sometimes no assistance at all.

Due to pounds and shelters being at capacity and residents seeking help with cats, instead being turned away from facilities This leaves residents to deal with the cat overpopulation issues immediately surrounding them, at their own cost, because they care and do not want to see these cats euthanized at full to capacity facilities.

This leads to a question of social license; stakeholders are speaking out and do not approve of the way business is being conducted in the pounds and shelters.

Recommendation:

- **The recommendation is a full evaluation of the current cat management services from LGAs, along with mandatory reporting and monitoring of all pounds and shelters, for statistics on both dogs and cats annually. Reporting to include intake, reclaimed, rehomed, and euthanasia totals and complaints received by LGAs.**
- **Implementing best practices that look at keeping pets with owners and providing solutions, so these animals do not enter the pound systems, for example, free boarding for a period of time for residents fleeing domestic violence or emergency situations, aiming to reunite the pet back into the home.**
- **Free surrender services of animals to LGA's with a similar process of AMOs attending properties wanting to surrender animals, with AMOs dealing directly with rehoming organisations or finding possible solutions to keep the pet in the home.**
- **AMOs receive training in community outreach skills and link in with appropriate community social services to explore further ways of working smarter with the community.**

Local Government Mandates

LGAs are quick to make further mandates in the community, based on public perceptions and opinions “We want this law brought in” but not understanding the current laws, implications, or how unenforceable they may be. It can be the public perception that if a mandate on cat confinement is introduced then all cat owners will automatically comply with this. Based mostly on the consultation being community surveys, LGAs can then bring in local laws without prior knowledge of current research or best practices, with an example of this being cat confinement laws.

Cat confinement laws are not enforceable from an AMO view when pertaining to semi-owned and unowned cats, as there is no owner to confine them, with owned cats this is very hard to prove ownership, so the reality is the situation remains and cat populations increase with time. (APWF 2021)

Enforcement activity depends on an admission of ownership of an animal or proof the animal comes from a specific property, which is almost impossible with cats. Dogs are generally easy to identify on a property and usually behind a gate, so ownership is easier to prove, but a cat could be sitting in a front yard a few houses away from where it may live, so who owns it? Ownership may be denied, as admittance to ownership may mean receiving an on-the-spot infringement, so why would you admit to ownership?

The history of cat management services shows the trap, impound, reclaim, rehouse, or euthanize standard approach to cat management fails. This method of providing a service is in fact costing councils money, to hold the cats at the animal management facilities or pounds and most certainly is not solving the cat overpopulation issue in our communities.

Mandatory Desexing Laws

Some municipalities have introduced mandatory cat desexing, but you still need to be able to identify an owner to enforce this. Ultimately, this does not stop the reproduction of the cats in society that we are not trapping or coming across via a complaint. The reclaim rates are very low Australia-wide for cats that enter pound systems.

A One Welfare (Pinillos 2016)) approach is proving to be more beneficial to community health and safety than an enforcement-only approach (Hawes et al.2020). Working with the community and providing useful resources to achieve compliance is far more effective than an enforcement-only approach. Generally, the largest number of animal-related complaints and intakes come from low socio-economic areas (Chua 2023), including the communities most disadvantaged financially. These are the communities where AMOs spend most of their time resolving animal-related issues and compliance matters. Taking an enforcement-only approach and issuing infringements for non-compliance, in these communities only creates further barriers and builds mistrust between the community and animal management officers (AMOs) with a perception there is a bias toward these residents, who may have outstanding issues with authorities. Ultimately AMOs seek voluntary compliance with animal legislative requirements to achieve proactive multicultural programs such as the Pets for Life Community Outreach Toolkit, which need to be implemented to assist compliance

Factors for the number of animals ending up in NSW pounds, and strategies for reducing these numbers.

Irresponsible breeders have a large contribution to the intake of pounds in NSW. Throughout COVID dog and cat breeders in NSW were transporting animals they had sold into other states. I received a couple of complaints from police that puppies that had been transported from NSW were being distributed out in parks, arrangements were being made for a meeting location for buyers purchasing online, and due to a limited supply of dogs in Victoria.

A search on one website for dog and cat breeders, purebred or crossbreed nationally, revealed breeder members State by State, with NSW clearly the highest total, with many of these breeders of designer breeds, being Cavoodles and Moodles and similar crossbreed dogs.

NSW- 1735

QLD- 1271

VIC- 747

WA- 644

SA- 319

TAS- 109

Recommendation:

- **A specialized enforcement team set up for the State of NSW to crack down on illegal and irresponsible pet breeders.**

Strategy for addressing the issue of cat overpopulation.

In 2012, I received a call to pick up a kitten from a building site found in a wall. I arrived at the building site with my AMO colleague, to pick up the friendliest 4–5-week-old DSH black kitten, we knew the fate of this kitten. The pound had cat management contracts for 6 councils, so the pound was always at over capacity, any kittens under 8 weeks old were euthanized. We sat in the car park at the pound and called everyone we thought may need a new kitten, but to no avail, impounded the kitten and it was euthanized. It was this day and this kitten that would change our way of cat management and we were not prepared to continue working this way anymore, it was unacceptable.

In 2013, with a small budget, we implemented a new way of cat management. The wishlist we had and were not prepared to compromise on, included: free sterilisation, microchipping, registration with the council for the first year and AMOs would transport the cats to the vet if needed and return them. Our way of thinking was to completely break down all barriers, so there was no reason to have an entire cat. This program was initially run by 2 AMOs then from 2018 only 1 AMO, speaking with residents who enrolled in cats the program, transporting cats, and liaising with veterinary clinics all while managing the day-to-day workload.

The AMOs have local knowledge of where the highest cat-related complaints and cat surrenders were from, in the municipality being postcode 3081 which was recorded on the customer request system. The first two years of this program (2013-2014) was micro-targeted to our low socioeconomic three suburbs in postcode 3081. The following two years (2015-2016) the program was opened to the whole city and from then on (2017-2021) ran two programs parallel, one being the initial micro-target area of postcode 3081, along with a city-wide program.

The owners that have participated in this free cat sterilization program have stated that it was purely due to cost that they had not already had them sterilised. Because this program was free, they participated. Some of the residents had 3 to 4 cats sterilised at one time, other households had eight cats sterilized.

When dealing with cat-related complaints in the community, the focus was shifted from enforcement to a community outreach approach of “what is the issue and how can we fix it”. One of the greatest learnings from the program is to be able to achieve complete honesty and have great communication skills. Without these two factors, AMOs will never know the extent of resident cat issues, so the problem will never really be fixed.

Low-cost sterilisation programs with conditions such as only 2 cats per household or pension cards will enrol a percentage of residents, to enrol everyone, a program must be free with no limits on numbers. If a property has 5 cats and we only sterilise 2 cats, this is not resolving the entire issue, but if you desex the 5 cats, there will be no further issues of breeding at the property.

Once the cats were sterilised, it may be the case that not all of the cats would stay with the owner, there may be animal welfare issues that need addressing with the owner, but once a rapport was developed this could be negotiated and you could then work on reducing cat numbers.

Pregnant cats and whole litters of kittens were booked in for when the kittens were old enough to be sterilized. If kittens were then given away by owners to friends they were already sterilised and microchipped to an owner, if litters were given to a shelter or rescue group this saved other organizations and groups financially for the surgeries and microchips. Most importantly, this saved unwanted litters in the future.

Due to the reduction in the number of cats entering our pound, allowed the pound facility to take on cats from at-capacity pounds and shelters to assist with rehoming.

The free sterilisation program at Banyule City Council in Victoria ran from October 2013- to December 2021. Over this period 869 cats were sterilised, microchipped and registered.

The results of this program, include:

- All residents who enrolled a cat in the program took full ownership of the cats,
- 66% reduction in cat intake by AMOs,
- 82% reduction in euthanasia
- 39%reduction city-wide in cat-related complaints and found cats
- 58% reduction in cat-related complaints and found cats in the target area (postcode 3081)
- An estimated saving for council of \$1,499,380.00 based on \$520 per cat-related call combined with savings for cat impounds.
- Total cost of the sterilisations \$84,000 (869 cats)

Table 1. Total number of cats by financial years impounded by AMOs into the pound facility.

Year	No. of Cats Impounded	No. of Kittens Impounded	Total No. Impounded for City
2012-2013	311	85	396
2013-2014	298	61	359
2014-2015	319	162	481
2015-2016	393	94	487
2016-2017	224	60	284
2017-2018	233	41	274
2018-2019	176	41	217
2019-2020	119	33	152
2020-2021	113	21	134

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Recommendation:

- **To implement free cat desexing programs throughout NSW. The cost of the program itself is considerably less than the price that cats, vets, shelter workers and AMOs currently pay for running trap, impound and adopt or kill programs.**

I am happy to discuss this submission further and can be contacted on

Regards

Jenny Cotterell

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NSW Government Circular No.14-01. 3 February 2014 A356265
<https://www.olg.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/M14-01.pdf>

Pets for Life Community Outreach Toolkit Website: <https://humanepro.org/page/tools-bring-pets-life-your-community>

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<https://petwelfare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/APWF-Community-Cat-Program-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

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