

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 8 - CUSTOMER SERVICE

INQUIRY INTO POUNDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

UNCORRECTED

At Macquarie Room, Parliament House, Sydney on Friday 15 December 2023

The Committee met at 9:00 am

PRESENT

The Hon. Emma Hurst (Chair)

The Hon. Mark Buttigieg

The Hon. Aileen MacDonald

The Hon. Rachel Merton

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

Ms Abigail Boyd (Deputy Chair)

The Hon. Peter Primrose

The Hon. Emily Suvaal

* Please note:

[inaudible] is used when audio words cannot be deciphered.

[audio malfunction] is used when words are lost due to a technical malfunction.

[disorder] is used when members or witnesses speak over one another.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the second hearing of the Committee's inquiry into pounds in New South Wales. I acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us here today. Would everyone in the room please turn their mobile phones to silent.

Parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses in relation to the evidence they give today. However, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of the hearing. I urge witnesses to be careful about making comments to the media or to others after completing their evidence. In addition, the Legislative Council has adopted rules to provide procedural fairness for inquiry participants. I encourage Committee members and witnesses to be mindful of these procedures.

Mr BRETT WHITWORTH, Deputy Secretary, Office of Local Government, Department of Planning and Environment, affirmed and examined

Dr KIM FILMER, Chief Animal Welfare Officer, Department of Primary Industries, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome, and thank you for making time to give evidence today. Do either of you have an opening statement that you would like to give?

BRETT WHITWORTH: I do, thank you, Chair. Firstly, I'd like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to participate in this inquiry and the opportunity to answer questions about the Government's submission. We see this inquiry as an important opportunity to consider how pound services in New South Wales function, identify factors impacting their effectiveness and look at options available to improve outcomes for companion animals. For many, companion animals are cherished family members. However, owning a dog or a cat entails substantial responsibility, encompassing welfare, behaviour and, importantly, compliance with regulations. As you can see from the Government's submission, the New South Wales framework for companion animal management is underpinned by the principle of responsible pet ownership and the premise that cat and dog welfare and management is a whole-of-community responsibility.

Our pounds should be seen as a last resort, when owners are no longer able to care for their pets. Responsibility for management and welfare of companion animals is shared across two ministerial portfolios, through two key Acts. There is the Companion Animals Act, which governs the ownership and management of companion animals in New South Wales, and there is the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, or the POCTA Act, which sets the codes and standards and investigatory procedures to safeguard the welfare of all animals in New South Wales, including companion animals both in the community and those housed in pounds and rehoming organisations. New South Wales councils are responsible for managing companion animals within their jurisdictions under the Companion Animals Act. This necessitates the provision of pound services to care for these animals. They are also required to adhere to the requirements prescribed by the POCTA Act when dealing with seized or surrendered animals.

While council pounds must meet animal welfare requirements under the POCTA Act, it is the NSW Police Force, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, or RSPCA, and the Animal Welfare League that are responsible for investigating animal welfare concerns in council pounds and determining any compliance action. Effort has been made through a combination of legislation and grants to facilitate a consistent decline in euthanasia rates. There has been a 77 per cent reduction in the number of dogs and a 50 per cent reduction in the number of cats euthanised between 2012-13 and 2020-21. Our fundamental objective is to minimise the number of animals entering pounds and shelters in the first instance, while ensuring optimal outcomes for those that do. We acknowledge that there is more work that can be done to meet this objective.

Recognising the growing concerns surrounding lost, abandoned and neglected animals, the New South Wales Government has made election commitments to develop reform in animal management and animal welfare. This will include reforms to the Companion Animals Act, conducted in collaboration with key stakeholders, alongside education and system improvements, as well as reforms in the animal welfare space. As I said at the beginning, we welcome this inquiry and the opportunity it creates to make a shared commitment to creating a future where companion animal pound facilities in New South Wales are recognised for their excellence in animal care and rehoming efforts.

The CHAIR: Dr Filmer, do you have an opening statement?

KIM FILMER: No, I don't, thank you.

The CHAIR: We'll now move to questions. I might kick off if that is okay. My first question is probably to the Office of Local Government. There has been some confusion, and possibly some conflicting evidence, throughout this inquiry about the boarding code. RSPCA NSW, which, as you know, is one of the enforcement agencies, raised concerns that councils which do not board cats or dogs for fee or reward may not actually have to comply with that code. In your submission, you talk about the fact that many councils are voluntarily complying with the code. Can you please clarify, does this breeding code apply to pounds and can it be enforced, or is it something that people are loosely using but is not something that is enforceable specifically for pounds?

BRETT WHITWORTH: Sorry, you mentioned the breeding code. You mean the boarding code?

The CHAIR: Sorry, if I said the breeding code, that was my mistake. It is definitely the boarding code.

BRETT WHITWORTH: To my understanding, the boarding code has been adopted, effectively, under the POCTA legislation. It's not something that falls under the Companion Animals Act. My understanding is there is no set of standards specifically for pounds. What councils do and what the enforcement agencies do is

effectively apply that in terms of when they are assessing whether something has offended the principles of the POCTA Act. I hate to throw the first question, but this really is a DPI question in terms of the state of the standards and the codes because that's the area of responsibility that they have under the POCTA legislation.

The CHAIR: So there are no mandatory standards for pounds other than obviously the POCTA Act itself. Has there been any legal advice on that, particularly for the Office of Local Government, or has that been raised with the Minister—that there aren't any specific standards for pounds?

BRETT WHITWORTH: Again, that comes back to the enforcement of animal welfare in pounds—the investigation of incidents and the enforcement of any concerns relating to animal welfare is something that is the responsibility of New South Wales police, Animal Welfare and the RSPCA. The approach that they use—the standards and the concepts of whether an animal has been mistreated—is a matter that they will take guidance from various codes from, but what you're asking me is does the Companion Animals Act have a set of standards for pounds.

The CHAIR: No, I know that they don't.

BRETT WHITWORTH: That's what I'm saying to you. It doesn't. You've asked me whether there is legal advice about there not being—

The CHAIR: Obviously there have been a lot of concerns and complaints brought up in this inquiry about this falling in between DPI and OLG. But, outside of that, I suppose my question is—we have heard from various councils. We have heard from Blacktown, Tamworth and other councils that are calling for robust standards, and they are calling for change. I understand it can go either way in regard to whether it is the Office of Local Government or it is DPI that is taking action to support pounds to make sure that happens. Although, obviously, from the council's perspective, when the councils are looking for help, they go to the local government Minister rather than to DPI.

BRETT WHITWORTH: Respectfully, I don't agree with that last statement because if councils have an issue about planning they go to the planning Minister; if councils have an issue about environmental matters, they go to the environment Minister. It's pretty well known that the investigation and enforcement of the POCTA Act is the responsibility of RSPCA, New South Wales police and animal welfare, and they effectively provide guidance and report advice back in through the Department of Primary Industries and, therefore, the Minister for primary industries. The question as to whether people want that to happen is an entirely different question and that's a policy issue. I think that's something that the Committee will probably give the Government guidance on.

The CHAIR: I guess I am trying to say that they do not see this as a POCTAA issue. A lot of these pounds are looking at this and saying, "Hey, if we're going to actually rebuild our establishment and change the building facilities, there are no standards." There are no rules around what size they should be, for example. That could fall under POCTAA, eventually, if cruelty was to then occur because you have an animal in a space that is so tight that they cannot move, or they have other problems; that would definitely fall under the DPI under the POCTAA agencies. But in regard to robust standards for the care to begin with, at the moment it is falling into—

BRETT WHITWORTH: Sorry, I respectfully disagree. I do acknowledge that there are no standards specifically for pounds; that's not what I'm disagreeing on. And I do acknowledge that there is a call for standards for pounds. But for people to say that there is nothing to identify how cruelty to animals might be investigated or considered—

The CHAIR: Sorry, I am just talking about building a facility and knowing what size to make those facilities. Councils are aware that if there is a cruelty complaint or cruelty occurs that goes to the enforcement agencies. What I am talking about at the moment is that a lot of pounds are feeling under pressure, obviously, to upgrade those facilities. A lot of them are not fit for purpose. However, because there are no standards—as you have admitted—they do not know what to build or how to build it or, if standards come in later, if they're going to fall outside of them.

BRETT WHITWORTH: But we do have a set of standards under the boarding code that can be used as a guide. That's what I don't quite understand in those statements—that there is nothing to help guide them. There are those standards and concepts about boarding facilities that can be used. That's why I'm somewhat confused when people say, "There are no standards. We don't know how to build these facilities." Well, best-practice approach would be to look at what contemporary standards you can apply and use that. We are going through this exercise at the moment with the Sydney dogs and cats facility at Kurnell where we're saying, "What is the most appropriate set of standards to use?" And, of course, looking at the boarding code standards is our first point of call.

As I said, if the Committee feels that it is important to make recommendations about the need for standards, the Government will quite happily accept that. The question then would become what is the most appropriate piece of legislation to put that in. My view, from a policy perspective, is that because the Companion Animals Act is about responsible pet ownership and the POCTA Act is about prevention of cruelty to animals, any standards that are set up to ensure that there is no cruelty to animals through the design and construction of facilities would best rest in the POCTA Act.

The CHAIR: Dr Filmer, has the boarding code ever been used to fine a council? Has any council pound been found to be in breach of the boarding code, or, because it is more of a voluntary piece, is POCTAA only ever looked at?

KIM FILMER: Maybe, just to start off with, I will read a section—if my computer comes back on—to clarify this point. The boarding code states at 1.3:

Establishments which provide commercial boarding services, Council Pound services and veterinary hospital services must comply with the standards of this code.

However, the POCTA Regulation prescribes that the boarding code only applies to a business "in the course of which dogs or cats are boarded for fee or reward".

The CHAIR: Which is it?

KIM FILMER: I'm not a lawyer; I'm a vet. However, in terms of your question, I think, to my knowledge, the investigations that the approved enforcement agencies have looked at are POCTAA issues. They also do audits, so they do some proactive investigations or checks, but the PINs, for example, are under POCTAA.

The CHAIR: Have you or the DPI received any correspondence about confusion that the code does seem to stipulate pounds but POCTAA seems to undercut that?

KIM FILMER: Not correspondence that I can recall, no.

The CHAIR: Could I find out how many PINs or corrective actions have occurred within councils in the past five years?

KIM FILMER: Yes, you can. I've got those here. Sorry, it takes a little while to find these things. The question was PINs, was it?

The CHAIR: Yes, PINs or corrective actions.

KIM FILMER: I've got the figures from 2021. I haven't got five years; I've got three years. The Animal Welfare League issued one PIN in 2021, and they've not issued any since. There is one ongoing investigation, but I don't know the outcome of that one. The RSPCA have issued one 24N notice but no PINs.

The CHAIR: I was wondering about RSPCA-run pound facilities and how they are inspected. Obviously, they cannot be inspected by the RSPCA themselves. Would it be the case that it would fall to the Animal Welfare League or the police if there was a concern at one of those facilities?

KIM FILMER: I think that would be the logical conclusion there, yes.

The CHAIR: Has it ever been a concern raised within the DPI that one of the authorities is potentially running a pound that could be a facility that then becomes investigated?

KIM FILMER: I've heard talk about the fact that they run pound services, but I haven't heard of any issues in terms of the standards or complaints about them, and if that was to be the case, as you've highlighted, I'd refer those people to one of the other investigation—POCTAA—agencies.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Mr Whitworth, where is the digital Pet Registry up to in terms of when it will be launched, or is it in trial? Where is it at?

BRETT WHITWORTH: I came here prepared to talk about pounds, but I do appreciate the Pet Registry is part of the companion animals space, so it is probably more of a general answer rather than a specific answer. The Pet Registry is continuing the build process. We have had a successful trial of the Pet Registry. That occurred last year. The intent was—sorry, I'm just looking for my notes. As I said, we had a trial and the pilot that was delivered in April this year, 2023, that included a trial with 11 breeders and around 100 new owners. The next steps for us are to broaden that out. Sorry, I don't have a time frame, but we expect to have more go-live elements next year. We've always talked about having a system in place by the end of 2024 and the beginning of 2025.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Is that going to be done through the Service NSW app?

BRETT WHITWORTH: It's not going to be done through the Service NSW app, but that is an ambition to get to that point. To achieve that we're using the Service NSW platform and we're using the Service NSW architecture. The existing companion animals register—and there is another register but the two come together—is the third largest digital database in the New South Wales government system after, I'm assuming, drivers' licences and motor registration. It's important—if we use the Service NSW base and architecture, that enables us to make identification processes easier and enables us to do further iterations around linking to the app.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: If my dog gets out of the yard and a local council picks up the dog, will that mean I may get a message through the app in the future?

BRETT WHITWORTH: That'd be a good ambition. I'm just contemplating. I don't think I've used my Service NSW app since I had to stop checking in, so it's probably more a case of—having said that, the Service NSW app does have links back to other facilities. It does have someone's email address and so on. Whether you get a ping on the app or whether you get an email, the whole point of the pet registry is about—I mean, it's whole reason for being when it was first set up was to be able to identify animals and, if they're lost, to be able to, using a microchip, identify their owner and return them.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I know it's not in your submission, but in the submission of Local Government NSW are 19 recommendations and a lot of them seem to be for funding. Are councils the best placed organisations to run these facilities, given, as the Chair says, we don't seem to have a standard, and rural and regional ones are different to city-based ones? Should it be a different organisation? Should the State be running these rehoming facilities?

BRETT WHITWORTH: That is a good question to ask. I don't know that—I can only offer a personal opinion and not—

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Okay.

BRETT WHITWORTH: Because that's really a policy matter for Government. But I do appreciate that the Committee will be looking and thinking about this and then providing advice to Government through its recommendations. If you were to go down that path, I suppose the issues that I would flag that need to be considered would be, first and foremost, the idea of local government is that it's local, so therefore the responsibility about pet ownership comes with the alternate component that, if there is a failure in people meeting their obligations, there needs to be enforcement. That enforcement rests with rangers that are best placed to be at the local level. That then comes to when a ranger seizes an animal and is unable to identify who the owner of the animal is, and then takes the animal to the pound.

Now, I suppose the question is that there needs to be a pound that that council can access without any restriction so that if it was a commercial operation or if it was something run by a State government, there would need to be clarity about who was responsible for bringing pets in. You'd need to consider the workplace health and safety elements of how do you bring a seized animal in, as a ranger? That has tended to be why those facilities have been sitting with councils. That said, we have the example of RSPCA, we have the example of Sydney Dogs and Cats Home, that are providing pound services for councils, so obviously we can crack that nut. Then we get to the question of should the State Government do it? The next question is how is that going to be funded? Is that an allocation that the Government says, "Well, we take that responsibility on and there is a budget allocation for that." That needs to be factored into the broader elements of how the Government sets their budgets and the priorities that they have and whether there are revenue options for them to help defray the costs.

The other element that would need to be asked is, is the Government the right agency to be running these facilities? You would effectively be—like, at the moment, the Office of Local Government with our 60-odd people, we're not the right people to be running pounds and certainly not in a decentralised way in which you need those services to be able to be run. Whether DPI is the right one—I doubt DPI would be the right one. So you have to talk about building architecture for a new government agency to do that. I just feel that when you look at it from that policy perspective, we are better staying with local government as having a responsibility to ensure that they have pound services and then working to see whether we can make the model better in terms of how the pounds are designed, how they're operated and how they're serviced.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: That brings me to the next question. If it stays with local government—and lots of councils are saying they don't have the capacity or funds—how can the Office of Local Government assist in that way, in terms of funding? Are you advocating to the State Government for funding so that the councils can continue to run these facilities?

BRETT WHITWORTH: That's an interesting question to ask because what that implies is councils are saying, "We don't have enough money to run these pounds." You have to then ask—councils are responsible for providing services to their communities and they take rates from their ratepayers to fund those services. They also

have the ability to take fees and charges for the provision of commercial and other activity. The key question is, if they are unable to fund those services, why are they unable to fund them? Is it that they're not prioritising the provision of those services? Is it because the degree of compliance that they need to achieve is not clear and they don't know how much money to put into prioritising those services?

I would rather turn the question around and say, what is the State Government doing to try and assist councils understand the priorities and the expectations of their community around service delivery and the revenue and the expenditure that they need to obtain and achieve in order to meet those expectations? The Government has recently released the IPART revised rate peg methodology and the first rate cap has been set on the basis of that methodology. At budget estimates this year Minister Hoenig, the Minister for Local Government, identified that IPART will be asked to undertake a financial sustainability review of councils. That will also look at these elements.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Thank you both very much for being here and for your expertise. If I could just possibly ask for an update, I'm just making reference to the submission where you outline the election commitments. There are three dot points:

- The Government committed to introducing a new animal welfare framework ...
- ... a new independent Office of Animal Welfare.
- ... a review of the *Companion Animals Act 1998* ...

I am just wondering whether there might have been a bit of an update as to what the plan might be or where these commitments might be at in terms of review, discussion, stakeholders—what all this means.

BRETT WHITWORTH: Obviously, as I've said, the review of the companion animals legislation would fall within Office of Local Government—the Minister for Local Government—responsibility. The review of the animal welfare reform legislation will sit, and does sit, with the Department of Primary Industries under the responsibility of the primary industries Minister. At this point—and I think the Minister for Local Government made this comment at budget estimates—there are a number of inquiries and reviews that are on foot at the moment. There is this inquiry. There are a number of coronial inquiries into dangerous dogs and dog attacks. There is also the reference that the Minister has made to the Animal Welfare Committee about cat containment. So the view would be that it would be premature to launch into a wholesale review without having the benefit of the advice from those inquiries and processes. I don't know whether there's any more from a Department of Primary Industries perspective. Dr Filmer?

KIM FILMER: I can give you a little bit of an update. In terms of the animal welfare framework and the review of POCTAA, as you know, there was quite a lot of work done previously, over the last probably four years, to develop up an animal welfare bill. That work is still ongoing and there's a lot of review of that being undertaken at the moment because there were some recommendations from a previous inquiry to make some changes to how that was put together with the three Acts coming together. So there is work going on in that space to progress the POCTA Act. In terms of the Independent Office of Animal Welfare, that was your other question, wasn't it?

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Correct, being the second commitment.

KIM FILMER: The appropriate model for the Independent Office of Animal Welfare is currently untested with stakeholders. It's clear that there's a broad range of community and stakeholder views about what an independent office should look like. We're working through those views to ensure that the office is fit for purpose.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: In terms of the companion animals legislative framework, councils are responsible for ensuring pound facilities are available. I'm reflecting on some of the earlier witness appearances here. Not all local councils have pound facilities, is that correct?

BRETT WHITWORTH: Not all councils have pound facilities, but all councils must have access to a pound.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Right. In terms of how that would work, I think the City of Sydney would possibly be—I'm just reflecting on that, that there was no pound facility within that local government area.

BRETT WHITWORTH: I don't know about the City of Sydney. I can give you the example of Georges River, where Georges River doesn't have a pound but it has access to the Sydney dogs and cats facility, as an example. Sydney dogs and cats have between, I think, six to seven councils that they provide pound facilities for. I don't have a detailed breakdown of where each council pound is in New South Wales or who they utilise, but the requirement is that every council has access to a pound.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: This may follow up with Madam Chair's comments on this, in terms of inspection as to that there is an available facility and it is operating, whose role is that?

BRETT WHITWORTH: This seems to imply that councils can't do things on their own. They are a local, democratically elected tier of government that have responsibilities to achieve. It's not like councils are out there saying, "We hope they don't notice that we don't have the pound," and we'll come round and check them out. I don't see why we should be checking that they have a pound or where that pound operates. Having said that, we do receive pound data from the council. As part of the annual return information that we receive from councils, they provide us with statistics about how many animals they've taken, the number that they were able to rehome, the number that they unfortunately had to euthanise, and so on. That data does come to us and we do put that up on our website. I've also just been informed that, as an example of that sort of joint service delivery, the City of Sydney use Sutherland council's pound facilities.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: So there's no oversight by the Office of Local Government into whether councils are meeting that requirement for a pound facility? It's a given that that's part of local government service and responsibility.

BRETT WHITWORTH: Yes. It's a given that that's part of local government service and responsibility, and councils report to us on how they're operating the pound or how they're dealing with the number of seized dogs and cats in their area.

The CHAIR: I have a follow-up question for Mr Whitworth on something you were talking about a moment ago around councils prioritising the pound service within their funding model. Obviously another thing that we're hearing throughout this inquiry is that—we just heard that Blacktown did prioritise and they put millions of dollars towards a facility but they're already at capacity. We're hearing a lot of that, that at the moment we've got what's been described as an animal crisis, where there are so many animals being abandoned that rescue groups are also at capacity and pounds are constantly at capacity. I'm assuming that means that a pound run, say, 20 years ago would probably be a very different pound from what is being run now, where there's a much higher increase in costs because there are so many more animals coming in. Has there been any kind of assessment as to what rates would need to be increased by, on any level, for local government to be able to build new facilities that met community expectations and was also able to run these pounds through good services and be able to house all the animals that are required?

BRETT WHITWORTH: There has been some work done. There was a rehoming practices report that was prepared for the Office of Local Government. There was a draft of that report that was released in 2022. The final report hasn't been released, but it will help to inform the companion animals review. That report flags the increase in the number of animals coming into pounds, but it also flags what can sometimes be unintended consequences of regulation and legislation in that the requirement to undertake rehoming practices—before an animal may be euthanised, as an example—has changed the dynamic of the number of animals within a pound. I'm not saying that is a bad thing; I'm just saying that there are a number of components to the increase in the number of animals.

You could lay that on the basis of contributing factors, such as an increase in the number of breeders and dogs and cats coming from breeders. You can talk about the impact of cost of living on people owning a pet and the challenges that that has created. You can also talk about the challenges of having a policy environment that probably in the last 10 years has really become more focused on desexing as a critical tool to stop the spread of unwanted animals. Those things combined, plus the general increase in population and the fact that as the population grows, we also grow the number of pets that we have, are all contributing to the number of increased seizures and animals entering pounds. I also think that we should be contemplating policy intent that tries to minimise the number of animals entering pounds as well. So you've got to plan for what could be growth, but you should be planning and putting policy in place to limit that growth as much as you possibly can.

The CHAIR: What are some of those policies to help us minimise? You've given a whole list of very good examples of why we're seeing such a massive influx of animals in the pound system in the first place, and that's very consistent with the evidence that we've heard throughout the inquiry. What policies can be put in place to help mitigate some of those factors and minimise the number of animals?

BRETT WHITWORTH: Again, this would be something for the Committee to contemplate. We had identified a number of the policy settings that we've already put in place through the incentivising desexing of cats and kittens, for example, through the use of lifetime registration; the use of targeted grants to assist certain animal welfare organisation seek out and try to desex cats, as an example; the ways in which we can help rehoming facilities. I do think there is probably more scope in the field of behavioural economics as to how we ensure, when people are contemplating a pet, that they know the life cycle costs of a pet, for example. Those are some of the policies levers that could be used in that space.

The CHAIR: In regards to—

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Sorry, Chair. Given the time, how would you like us disembodied members to indicate that we would like to ask a question?

The CHAIR: Just jump in, Peter. Sorry. Did you have a question now? I'm happy to sit back.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I just have a couple, and I don't know about my two colleagues because I can't talk to them. The Hon. Rachel Merton and I are both members of another inquiry that is looking at the issues to do with the shortage of veterinarians in New South Wales. Yesterday we were both in Inverell and talking to local vets there. This is addressed to both witnesses but particularly to Dr Filmer. Does the shortage of veterinarians have an impact in relation to the operation of pounds in New South Wales? If so, do you have any suggestions about how that might be addressed?

KIM FILMER: The honest answer to that is I don't know because that's something between the councils, the local pounds and the local veterinarian, so at that very down-in-the-weeds level. I don't have that information. Anecdotally and common sense would dictate that if there were a shortage of vets, that may make it a little bit more difficult. But most towns and, I would imagine, most councils can procure those services somehow. I've lived in western New South Wales in quite remote places and there were vets there—the pounds had access to vets in those places. I'm not answering your question, sorry, but that's probably the best I can do because at that micro level, I don't have that detail.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Given the shortage, we're finding—and it's been indicated to us—that it's impacting on a whole range of services and causing distress to a number of veterinarians. Could you take it on notice and see if you could maybe ask around for us?

KIM FILMER: I can, but it might be better if the councils were able to provide that information. Is Mr Whitworth able to get that information? Because I don't think I'll have access to that data.

BRETT WHITWORTH: I don't know that there is data per se, but I think the issue of the direct interface between veterinarians and the operation of pounds comes in either the receipt of animals that are abandoned—so people will quite often leave them with a vet and then a vet has to take them to a pound. That in itself is an element of concern. The other element is when vets are called upon to provide services to ensure the welfare of the animals in the pound. The third element is when there need to be decisions made about euthanasia and the processes by which that occurs. I did give evidence with Mr Hansen to the veterinary shortage inquiry, and I think these were points that we made at that time.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I just thought it might be an issue of concern. Do you have any documents indicating the key learnings from other States about how best to manage animals in pounds and what arrangements there are? This has come up a couple of times, but I would imagine somewhere in the bureaucracy there would be someone putting together a document that says this is how things work better in Victoria, for example, as compared to New South Wales. Is there such a document around?

BRETT WHITWORTH: The bureaucracy is probably not as big as what people anticipate, but we did have the Rehoming Practices Review, as part of that—and the draft of that document is available. It was prepared by CIE—so independent consultants. It would have looked at other jurisdictions as well. Whether from an animal welfare perspective—Dr Filmer, I don't know whether there's a comparison across other States. I will say, when I meet with my colleagues from other jurisdictions—my local government colleagues—not everyone has responsibility for animals. In Victoria, for example, companion animals are entirely within their department of primary industries' control. We don't necessarily compare notes on that.

KIM FILMER: I've probably got nothing further to add to that.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Can we get a copy of that report?

BRETT WHITWORTH: It's publicly available on the website.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: So there is nothing else [audio malfunction].

BRETT WHITWORTH: Nothing—sorry?

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: No-one has a table indicating what good things other States have done that might be worthwhile looking at in New South Wales?

BRETT WHITWORTH: I can take that on notice and ask whether we do have that. It's possible that someone has looked at that, but I don't believe that's necessarily—again, it comes down to are we talking about operations from how do councils operate their pounds? Or are we talking about animal welfare standards and

standards for pounds in other States, which, as I said, does bridge the jurisdictional divide between Office of Local Government and DPI. But I will take that on notice and see whether we do have such a document.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: As I said, I'm specifically interested in the issues of concern to this inquiry, which is how to best manage animals in pounds and make those arrangements.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: My first question is to Mr Whitworth. Noting he is taking some notes at the moment, I might pause.

BRETT WHITWORTH: No, sorry. I'm making sure that if I take something on notice, I remember that I've done it. I know Hansard will pick it up.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: My first question is to you in terms of the Companion Animals Act and the POCTAA, or Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. What would you like to see changed in those two Acts?

BRETT WHITWORTH: This is I suppose where I need to disconnect myself as a public servant and say that obviously these will be matters for government policy and the Government will take advice from the Committee. I do think that people tend to look at the Companion Animals Act and insert animal welfare components into that, and that's a legitimate thing to do but they must also remember that what sits at the heart of the Companion Animals Act is responsible pet ownership. And so therefore we've got to come at it from a policy perspective: How do we ensure that people can be responsible pet owners? How do we ensure that they are aware of the obligations that they're taking on when they take on an animal?

We also then need to consider whether the sanctions are sufficient to ensure that if there is a failure of that responsible pet ownership, such as the animal gets loose or the animal is never brought into the system in that they're born, they're not registered and they're not microchipped—and so those are the animals that probably are at greatest risk from an animal welfare perspective. There are animals that are cared for and protected—we've got to remember to continue policy regimes there—and then it's what happens when the system breaks down? If you can get at when the animal is born, that will help to address that. So the next point is how do we address the standards, the codes, the requirements for breeders to make sure that breeders are identifying and breeding appropriate numbers of animals, and that they are being cared for appropriately in their first few months of life. Because that can influence behaviour of the animal, and if that behaviour is not appropriate in those early days it can become an ongoing problem later in life. How do we ensure that those animals are traceable through the system?

That then gets you to the third pillar of what you will probably need to think about, which is the animals that are totally outside the system: community-owned or semi-owned cats, feral cats, and dogs that aren't incorporated into the system because people may be breeding a dog because they might be concerned it's restricted. I do think that looking at sanctions around how we can get a more effective enforcement mechanism there would be useful, but I'm also conscious that that's a really vexed policy area because you've got to balance animal welfare concerns with clarity of enforcement policy. Sometimes if you've got too clear an enforcement policy, it may end up with adverse animal welfare outcomes and vice versa.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: In terms of the legislation and associated regulation and codes and standards that you spoke about, do you think those standards and regulations and codes adequately protect the welfare of animals in pounds?

BRETT WHITWORTH: That's a challenging question because our understanding of what an appropriate level of care for an animal is has also changed over time. Some of those pounds that were built many years ago probably don't have more contemporary concepts around protection of animals from heat or from cold. That said, I'm now straying into space that's not Office of Local Government because I'm straying into the space that is around the prevention of cruelty to animals. I do think that's an area that I'd probably prefer other people to provide advice on in terms of do they think that the existing standards, controls, enforcement mechanisms and investigatory powers they have—and in this I'm talking about the police, RSPCA, Animal Welfare League—are sufficient for them to address any concerns they're seeing coming out. I do feel like we need to address this issue of standards and what we are designing pounds to be built to. We need to clarify that because I feel that's a degree of uncertainty that is enabling people to say, "We're not quite sure whose responsibility it is."

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: Recommendation 8 says there should be greater information sharing across companion animal management. What additional information should councils, pounds and rehoming facilities be required to provide that would help in that better sector-wide approach to pound management?

BRETT WHITWORTH: I would like to take that on notice because I'd like to provide a more fulsome answer because I think that's an important question and it goes partly to why we're investing time and money in the Pet Registry as well. I'm firmly of the belief that we don't have enough data to help us guide policy outcomes

here. We have a lot of data but we don't have enough data, and we don't have enough data on the basis that that data can be shared across different jurisdictions and across different agencies.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: I might move on to another question then. In terms of the sector in local government, does the sector have adequate trainees and qualified animal managers? Do you need more cert IV animal carers?

BRETT WHITWORTH: I think the Government has made an election commitment that it would like to increase the number of apprentices and trainees across the whole local government sector. I am aware that there are shortages across any number of trades or skilled qualifications or professional qualifications. I dare say that if we delved into shortages we'd identify shortages in people that are appropriately trained to work in a pound as well. I do think that that is a challenge, and it's an area where I hope the Government is going to be able to rectify that. It also is important to recognise that you can't just bring apprentices and trainees in; you've got to have someone to supervise them as well. That in itself is an ongoing challenge.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: Absolutely. In your submission, you've also identified that the rehoming amendments to the Companion Animals Act have led to longer stays in pounds. Would you suggest any further amendment to rehoming to limit this?

BRETT WHITWORTH: That's a challenging question again because if you went back on that provision, you would be not incentivising but creating an opportunity for more euthanasia to occur. If you go forward on that provision, then you've got to be looking and considering the capacity of the rehoming organisations to actually rehome animals. I understand that there is a high degree of concern around the rehoming organisations' ability to rehome the number of animals that they are receiving. I would prefer to probably leave that provision as it is and look at ways in which we can reduce—I would rather the policy intent and focus be on reducing the number of animals coming into a pound and reducing the number that need to be rehomed in the first place.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: In the minute I have left, what are the sorts of things that we can do to try to reduce that?

BRETT WHITWORTH: I think I flagged some of these things before, but looking to see whether we can get greater responsibility and regulation around the number of animals that can be bred, making sure that those animals are brought into the system from the very beginning. I do feel that there's some behavioural economics work that can be done about making sure that if you take on a pet you're aware of the cost of taking on a pet. Unfortunately the statistics I've seen tend to suggest that animals offered up for rehoming—not seized animals but animals offered up for rehoming—there is a lower socio-economic sort of status applied to the owner, which reflects that cost-of-living issues were probably driving some of the reasons why that animal has been offered up for rehoming. That's where you get to one of those challenges in that the demand for more resources to come into the sector can only come from one place, which is the ratepayers or the taxpayers' pockets. The more you put those rates and taxes up, the more you impact on cost of living. So it is a bit of a challenging space there.

The CHAIR: Thank you both for coming today. We appreciate the fact you've come so close to Christmas. We do appreciate you making some time to be here. There was a couple of questions on notice. The secretariat will be in contact with you both. The Committee may have further questions on notice, about which the Committee's secretariat will be in contact with you both, as well. Again, thank you for your time.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Councillor DARRIEA TURLEY, AM, President, Local Government NSW, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Mr DAMIAN THOMAS, Director, Advocacy, Local Government NSW, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I now welcome our next witnesses and thank them for giving their time to give evidence today. Do either of you have an opening statement that you'd like to begin with?

DARRIEA TURLEY: Yes, Chair. I do. Thank you, Chair and the Committee members, for providing the opportunity for me to appear today at this hearing. I appear today as President of Local Government NSW, the peak body representing all 128 councils across New South Wales, as well as related entities. Councils are regulators of the Companion Animals Act, and many also operate pounds and rehome animals that are surrendered or otherwise come into their care. As a sector, local government is committed to providing for the welfare of companion animals in the community. Councils do their utmost to give animals physical, social and enrichment opportunities while in their care.

Councils take the strong view that any animals that can be rehomed should be and, therefore, go to great lengths to rehome animals. This can include keeping a dog or a cat for longer periods if the facility has physical capability to do so, in the hope that a suitable home can be found. This comes at a cost to the pound operators for care, food and shelter, where the estimated cost for keeping a dog in a pound is \$40 per day. The major challenge facing local government, underpinning everything that councils do, is the financial sustainability. I appreciate this is not an inquiry about financial sustainability, but the resourcing of councils is central to the capability and performance of pounds and animal-rehoming incentives. Rate pegging, cost shifting, and State and Federal funding arrangements that are no longer fit for purpose all conspire to restrict the ability of councils to provide the infrastructure and services that the community expects and deserves.

Local Government NSW commissioned a report into cost shifting, released last month, which found that New South Wales councils are currently being asked to absorb cost shifting worth more than \$1.36 billion each year, with the practice imposing an estimated cumulative burden of more than \$10 billion over the last decade. That \$10 billion cannot be spent on councils' core functions. For the management of companion animals, the report estimated a total cost shift onto New South Wales councils of \$29.6 billion for 2021-22. This is a cost of providing functions under the Companion Animals Act above and beyond the fees and subsidies councils are able to collect. Councils need additional support to bridge this funding gap. This funding would allow for upgrading of pound facilities, provision of support services to facilities, rehoming and education to the community about responsible pet ownership.

Beyond funding issues, rural and remote councils in particular also report finding it difficult to attract and resource adequate staff. Limited access to trades, operational staff and vets can often preclude expansion of pounds and rehoming facilities. There are many challenges faced by councils in operating pounds and planning facilities, yet councils do prioritise the return of animals to their owners or to a new home. In the last decade, councils made substantial progress to increase successful rehoming of companion animals and reduce euthanasia. However, while laws and community expectations with respect to our pets have changed over the years, funding has not kept up with these changes.

New South Wales Government funding is needed to increase pound capacity and for facility upgrades in the short term; however, the long-term solution is in the prevention of the flow of animals being impounded in the first place. Animal desexing, training and responsible pet ownership and community education are all critical components of a solution for the improvement of animal welfare and reduced cost to the community and environment. As a sector, we look forward to working collaboratively with animal welfare rescue and rehoming organisations and the community to further improve animal welfare outcomes in New South Wales. Thank you. I'm happy to take questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. I will throw to Ms Abigail Boyd, who is online, to start with questioning.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you very much to our witnesses for coming along and for your submission, which is very detailed. I wanted to just head to the section in relation to cats. And I understand from the councillors that I have spoken to across New South Wales that there is real pressure at the moment from communities to do something about the killing of native wildlife by cats and that's putting a lot of pressure on local councils. I know that a number of councillors put forward motions to try and expand councils' powers to deal with that, and I see that in your recommendations—I think, recommendation 16. Would it not be preferable, though—you were talking about cost shifting before—for the State to be the ones to take control of that issue and to implement a statewide plan, similar to what the RSPCA's Keeping Cats Safe at Home program's

about, but actually something that's statewide, rather than having different rules for each council area when it comes to cat curfews?

DARRIEA TURLEY: If it's okay I might ask Damian Thomas to respond to that question.

DAMIAN THOMAS: It is an issue in which there is significant interest across the local government sector. At our most recent annual conference, held just last month, there were multiple motions put forward by councils that called for cat containment policies to be introduced across the State. The position that's been endorsed through our conferences, though, is that councils should be given the ability to introduce containment laws in consultation with their communities. So while there are many councils that are keen to introduce these policies and cat containment requirements in their LGAs, some councils don't see this as a solution or think that it will work in their community. From our perspective we do see that there should be flexibility as one size doesn't fit all. But, having said that, I can certainly see that there would be benefits to a multi-LGA approach to cat containment and especially in metropolitan areas where, of course, cats don't abide by LGA boundaries.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Yes, that's what we hear a lot—obviously cats don't abide by LGA boundaries. But also we don't have a shelter or pound per local council area necessarily, so it gets incredibly complicated when you have a rescue organisation that is taking cats from different areas and not knowing what its responsibilities are in relation to those cats. Instead of giving these powers, if we were to have a well-resourced program at a statewide level, do you think that would achieve the same aims that the councillors were concerned about when they put forward those motions at your conference?

DAMIAN THOMAS: It may, and I understand that the Minister for Local Government has committed to an inquiry into cat containment across New South Wales. That's definitely something we would be keen to see further explored as part of that inquiry.

The CHAIR: I'll throw in a couple of quick questions. I know that you've obviously very strongly called for State government funding in regard to the pound crisis in New South Wales. Can I confirm that when you're calling for State funding you are suggesting that the pounds themselves are still run by local government but the funding would come in as an assistance package so that it wasn't entirely based on huge rate increases that would have to be put into place to be able to upgrade the pounds to the requirements for the number of animals there are?

DARRIEA TURLEY: That's my understanding. Mr Thomas?

DAMIAN THOMAS: Yes, that's right. We would definitely seek that support—funding from the State Government—to assist with the infrastructure upgrades and ongoing costs of care. We don't see that these costs should be shifted onto the community.

The CHAIR: You're suggesting that local government itself would still run the pounds. Is that correct?

DARRIEA TURLEY: That's right, yes, where they choose to do so.

The CHAIR: In the previous session we heard a lot about minimising the number of animals that come into the pound system in the first place, and there's obviously a lot of State laws that could be put into place to help reduce the number of homeless animals. I know that we ran an inquiry into puppy farming, which still remains legal in New South Wales. Backyard breeding remains legal in New South Wales. Can you talk a little bit about how some of these laws are affecting the number of animals that are ending up in pounds and what other legislation would help stop animals ending up in pounds in the first place?

DARRIEA TURLEY: I'll hand that one back to Mr Thomas.

DAMIAN THOMAS: There are a number of legislative proposals that have been put forward by councils and LGNSW. One of those, initially, is the cat containment policy, which we've already discussed briefly.

The CHAIR: That would increase the cost, though, and increase the number of animals in pounds. I'm wondering what legislation would be proposed to help us reduce the number of animals in pounds?

DAMIAN THOMAS: The cat containment policy—I understand if there were fewer cats that were able to be outdoors and breeding, that could have one impact on reducing the number of cats that do end up coming into the system. An additional option may be to add an opt-in provision for councils to issue orders and fines for individuals who repeatedly fail to identify and register puppies or kittens, or for incidents of animal hoarding as well. In terms of breeding restrictions and potential legislative changes there, our annual conference has called for a strengthened code of practice for breeding cats and dogs which would, again, hopefully reduce the number of animals that do require impounding or rehoming, which puts pressure on councils as well as rescue and rehoming organisations. There's also been a position put forward by councils to our annual conference, which was supported,

which called for strengthened planning legislation assessment requirements for breeding facilities to better align with what's in place in Victoria.

The CHAIR: I'm just wondering if you're aware of—

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: Chair, sorry. I'm wondering how you want us to indicate online when we have a question. I'm just mindful of the time.

The CHAIR: I have one question and then I will throw to you guys. I'm just wondering if you're aware that in Victoria, where they have put cat containment laws in, some of those councils, for example, have had a 68 per cent increase in impoundments, and whether you think that the current pound crisis that we have could cope with something like a 68 per cent increase in impoundments of cats.

DAMIAN THOMAS: It would certainly be a challenge, given the capacity constraints that the sector is facing. I understand that a number of the different proposals and recommendations in our submission would need to be brought in in a coordinated way, and that includes the increased capacity and funding for rehoming and rescue organisations, as well as measures to stop the flow of animals entering into that system in the first place.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: Thank you very much to you both for appearing today. My first question is around the number of trainees and qualified animal managers that are working in the sector. Do you think there is sufficient? Do you need more cert IV animal carers in local government?

DARRIEA TURLEY: No, I don't think there is sufficient. I think part of it is how do we attract people—rangers—to those roles as well. I think Mr Thomas may have more data around that.

DAMIAN THOMAS: I don't have specific data but I think earlier the Office of Local Government referred to skills shortages across the board, and I'm sure this would be an area where that's also an issue.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: We've talked previously about cat containment, so I will come back to that if we have time. In terms of the improved Pet Registry that we've both spoken about, as government, how will that assist with the process of desexing and registering cats in particular? What features do you think that registry needs?

DARRIEA TURLEY: Mr Thomas, do you have comments on that one?

DAMIAN THOMAS: Improving the registry system and the identification and registration processes would be of assistance. I understand that currently there are two separate steps to identify and then register a companion animal. Simplifying the registry to make it easier for people to register their pets would increase the chances that those pets could be returned if they were impounded or held by a rehoming or rescue organisation. It would also be helpful to make it easier for people to update their own details in a more efficient way through the registry so that if their address changes or their contact details change they're more likely to be up to date and, again, the animal is more likely to be rehomed in a rapid manner.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: I have asked this question to the Office of Local Government as well, but I'm very interested in your views also. It is around the rehoming amendments to the Companion Animals Act, which may or may not have led to longer stays in pounds. Would you suggest any further amendments to rehoming to limit this?

DARRIEA TURLEY: Mr Thomas, I'll refer it to you.

DAMIAN THOMAS: These are the rehoming rules that introduce the need for councils to give written notice to at least two rehoming organisations and introduce other requirements. When they were first introduced, LGNSW did express its support for the intent of those reforms but, again, it does come down to issues of resourcing and funding. All animals seek to avoid the unnecessary euthanasia of animals. If there were to be an increase in that funding to support rehoming organisations and councils and their pounds to hold those animals for a longer period of time, rehabilitate if needed and provide the behavioural assessments and training that's needed to support them being rehomed, I think that would go a long way towards resolving the issues of capacity at the moment. At the moment we are seeing cases where councils are being obliged to hold animals that have little to no chance of being rehomed. Of course, the longer an animal is held in a facility, the more training and rehabilitation it does need, which, again, presents those resourcing challenges.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: When you say the resourcing and capacity issues, have you got examples of that or anything else that you can talk to around the impact of that?

DAMIAN THOMAS: I think it would relate to the assisting for infrastructure and upgrades and the ongoing costs of care. More time for socialisation and behavioural training would assist with that, certainly.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: I asked about the information sharing across companion animal management as well. What additional information should councils, pounds and rehoming facilities be required to provide which would help with that better sector-wide approach to pound management? How can we make this a better approach for everyone?

DAMIAN THOMAS: I might take that on notice, unless Councillor Turley has further information.

DARRIEA TURLEY: No, we will take that on notice.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: Beautiful, thank you. In terms of animal registration fees now, could you talk in any detail about the sorts of perverse incentives that exist there with those animal registration fees?

DAMIAN THOMAS: Again, I might take that on notice. In broad terms, the animal registration fees don't come near to covering the costs of providing the care and rehoming services that councils provide. But in terms of the incentives—the perverse incentives, rather—that these fees may introduce, I will take that on notice, if possible.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: Sure. Could you tell us, just generally speaking, what you would like to see changed in the Companion Animals Act and in the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act? What are the changes that Local Government NSW would like to see in those two pieces of legislation?

DARRIEA TURLEY: I will hand that over to Mr Thomas as well.

DAMIAN THOMAS: Again, I will mention that the introduction of cat containment policies is one change that is sought. There is an interest in the ability for councils to issue orders and fines for individuals who fail to identify and register puppies or kittens, or for incidences of animal hoarding as well. There is an interest in defining when a cat is considered to be owned or what cat ownership entails. This goes to that issue of semi-owned cats that may be looked after by a neighbourhood but not formally registered or owned by any one person. Councils have also expressed interest in the Act being amended to clarify the application of section 32, which is around powers for seizing a cat and what councils are able to do there. And, again, definitions around domestic, infant or feral cats would be helpful. That would assist with the clarity of enforcement policies within councils.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: In your opinion, are the powers that are afforded to inspectors in the POCTAA adequate to enable them to fulfil the principal objectives of the Act?

DAMIAN THOMAS: I won't take on notice whether those are adequate or not, but, again, a large part of this issue comes down to the funding and resourcing available to the RSPCA and councils and other regulators in ensuring that these laws can be effective.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Thank you very much, both of you, for participating. I very much recognise the detail of the submission, and it's very helpful for our consideration of this and the terms of reference. I'm looking at page 6 in terms of a response to section (a) in the submission. The reference is low collection rates by owners, and you're citing a metropolitan council pound advising the collection rate for dogs has dropped from 50 per cent to 26 per cent. And the increased stays in pounds—I'm just wondering if you might be able to elaborate a little bit on that.

DAMIAN THOMAS: Sure. As part of developing this submission we consulted with a range of councils and held a workshop as well, online, so that all councils were able to provide input. We received significant contributions from councils across the State. That is quite an incredible statistic provided by that one metro council—that the collection rate for dogs had dropped from 50 per cent to 26 per cent in recent years—but also with the majority of dogs being around three years old, many of which were not desexed or microchipped. I suppose that three-year-old age perhaps correlates with the boom in pet ownership during the COVID pandemic, and then subsequently the cost-of-living pressures and rising costs and, I guess, unanticipated costs of pet ownership that many people have realised exist. But we can take on notice if there's further detail on that to provide.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Thank you. In terms of an earlier hearing on this, I agree about cost-of-living pressures in terms of meeting the requirements of pets and the consequence in terms of the pounds. I was also interested to learn a little bit more about the closure of RSPCA-operated pounds and what that means to your members.

DAMIAN THOMAS: I understand that there have been, in recent years, eight RSPCA-operated pounds, I believe, that have closed in recent years. This introduces more pressure onto council pounds, as well as other rehoming and rescue organisations, to assist with managing the growing number of animals that are being impounded. Certainly what we have called for is just—and I'm reluctant to mention it again—that increased

funding for capacity and upgrades for pounds and rescue and rehoming organisations would go a long way towards filling that gap or meeting those capacity constraints.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Possibly we're in a post-COVID environment, too. In terms of the surge of pet ownership, what are members reporting in terms of the post-COVID now?

DAMIAN THOMAS: It really comes down to the issues of capacity constraints. We have seen, for example, Blacktown council has opened its new Blacktown Animal Rehoming Centre or BARC, which is an impressive facility. But on top of the funding it receives through the Companion Animals Fund, the council has to supplement that by up to \$3 million per year. And that council, that facility provides for a range of animal facilities for seven councils in the region as well. Narrabri, for example, recently opened a new facility for companion animals. The facility size was increased to include 12 dog pens, but these were straightaway at capacity. The issue is, again, just that ongoing capacity constraint following the COVID environment.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Thank you both for attending today. I have a question with regard to your summary of recommendations. I wanted you to expand on 3 and 4, where you have said "invest in the upgrade and expansion of pound facilities across New South Wales". Does that mean that you will be advocating to the councils to do this? Or is it advocating to State Government to increase—because then you've got your other ones about increased capital and operational funding. So, you're saying you are to invest in the upgrade, but how will this be funded?

DARRIEA TURLEY: My understanding is that it is asking the State Government to invest. Councils are already overinvesting and supporting their pounds and the Companion Animals Act. As we said, the cost shift to local government is over \$29 million over the last 2021-22, and so we're asking for that investment from the State Government.

The CHAIR: Thank you for your evidence today. I believe there were some questions on notice, which the Committee secretariat will be in contact with you both about. I think there are probably going to be some questions on notice as well. Thank you again for attending today, so close to Christmas. We do appreciate your time and also your submission.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Dr DIANA RAYMENT, BanSci PhD, Program Specialist, PetRescue, affirmed and examined

Ms KRISTINA VESK, OAM, Chief Executive Officer, Cat Protection Society of NSW, sworn and examined

Ms NERIDA ATKIN, Feline Services Manager, Cat Protection Society of NSW, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I now welcome our next witnesses. Thank you for attending today. Is there an opening statement from PetRescue that you would like to make?

DIANA RAYMENT: Yes, thanks. PetRescue is a national charity that works with and for approximately 900 member groups to create futures for pets who need homes. Currently 354 of our members are located in New South Wales and collectively New South Wales members have adopted out over 203,000 pets via the PetRescue platform. Seventy-five per cent of this cohort are rescues who volunteer their time, money and efforts, often sacrificing their own personal health and wellbeing helping pets who get lost in the system to find a way out. In addition to our work within the sector, the PetRescue team works hard to understand our engaged public. Through ongoing conversation we strive to understand what they love about their pets, how pets enrich their lives, their concerns about how pets are treated, and what they want, need and expect from the system that cares for pets and people who need assistance in what is often the worst time of their lives.

It's made abundantly clear to us on a daily basis that the problem at hand is much bigger than the thousands of pets who suffer in substandard conditions and lose their lives in the system. Equally, it's clear to us that there is ample compassion and will from the community to make things better. To illustrate this, I would like to tell you about Buddy. Buddy is not his real name. He is not a statistic that will be on any organisation's yearly report. Buddy was purchased as a puppy by two loving people and raised as part of their family. For three years, he snuggled at night with the family cat. He kept his human mum company when dad was deployed with the Defence Force. When the time came to welcome a new human into their family, Buddy was a gentle and caring big brother. Buddy loved other dogs and his doggy manners were excellent. He was desexed, microchipped, vaccinated and registered, and his owners loved him deeply and did all of the right things, as responsible pet owners do.

Buddy's owners reached out to us just a couple of months ago because they were being moved to a different base and into accommodation that was not suited to Buddy. Buddy's owners wanted to have a say in his future because they understood his needs and cared enough about him to seek a solution that kept him out of an unsafe system. So we listed Buddy through Home2Home, PetRescue's owner-assisted rehoming program, fully expecting that, like hundreds of other Home2Home pets do, he would find his happily ever after. Buddy waited and his people waited. Eventually he went on trial to a new home. We were all happy. But it quickly became clear that, when he arrived, the resident dog was not willing to share and so Buddy came home to his original family. Buddy was distressed at that point and his owners were distressed themselves. They'd been through a lot and coming to the decision to rehome him was obviously a lot for them.

When he arrived back, they described him as a different dog. Their recollection of the events that unfolded over the following day is heartbreaking. Over the course of the next five hours, everyone's distress compounded and, with no skilled person to turn to for practical help and knowing that Buddy simply would not cope in a shelter and feeling like they had no other option, Buddy's owners made the gut-wrenching decision to euthanise Buddy. When we found out, we were devastated. Nobody who loves their pet as much as Buddy's owners loved him make the decision to end their pet's life without deep anguish, distress and grief. In the moment that Buddy needed someone to be there by them, by the owners' side and by Buddy's side, to help him through a day successfully and actually be able to navigate that grief-filled day successfully, there was nobody there. And as a result, Buddy is dead.

We speak with owners daily who are facing this decision. Do they give up their pet into a system that they know is unsafe or do they make the call to euthanise themselves? These are pets that never enter the system at all. Maybe they can't afford to care for their pet but they're not "officially" poor enough to actually get help from the very few and very overburdened organisations who are providing preventative care and crisis care to owners in that situation. Maybe they live in what we call a resource desert, an area where there is a high demand and no appropriate services to actually help them. Or maybe, as is increasingly the case at the moment, they and their pets just need a bit of help to get back on their feet and stay together, but that's not available. And so they reach out to us through our crisis care directory and through the assisted rehoming program to see if we've got a better option for them than choosing the system or choosing to euthanise.

There is a fundamental mismatch between what the system was initially designed to do and what the community actually needs from the system in order to be able to live well with their pets. This is especially the case when life pulls the rug out from under them. From our perspective, the task for the Committee is not to tweak the details of the current legislation and to pour more resources into a system that is not fit for purpose. We

recognise that it's not fit for purpose. We recognise that it's not designed to do what the current community needs it to do. We encourage you to re-imagine what the system could be and to learn from others who are doing it already how to use the same resources more efficiently and more effectively to support pets in place, how to leverage community foster care and volunteer programs to make sure that you can actually work with your community to provide good outcomes for your community and reserve places in the system in care for those pets who genuinely have no other option to be there. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that opening statement. Does the Cat Protection Society have an opening statement?

KRISTINA VESK: Thank you to the Committee for undertaking this inquiry and for inviting Cat Protection to be here today. Through our many programs, but particularly shelter and adoption services, support for desexing and vaccination, research and advocacy, and free information about cat care, our charity makes a positive impact on both human and feline health, welfare and wellbeing. In 2022-23 we saw 1,351 cats and kittens find their forever homes. As well as ensuring all adopted felines are desexed, we helped a further 2,391 cats with desexing. But the demand for assistance far outstrips our capacity. There are simply more cats than homes available at any one time.

The situation has been made so much worse by increased relinquishment due to housing and cost-of-living pressures and delayed desexing, which can be caused by either or both the veterinary workforce shortage and financial pressures. We are literally growing the problem of feline homelessness as every day goes by. We're now also experiencing a severe shortage of F3 vaccine in Australia, which not only puts cats and especially kittens at risk of disease and death; it imposes additional burdens on already overwhelmed veterinary clinics. In case that wasn't enough distress for an already very stressed veterinary workforce, proposed changes to the New South Wales medicines, poisons and therapeutic goods regulation will add further burdens and restrict what is good welfare practice, such as safely combining drugs in one syringe to be given as a single injection.

The perfect storm—as we described in our submission to this inquiry—has continued to gain strength and we are in a critical situation which is causing great harm to both cats and people who care about them. We have a most welcome grant from the New South Wales Government for a targeted desexing program, but our capacity to deliver it is severely hampered by both the vet shortage and, even more detrimentally, the incapacity to desex cats unless they can be registered to an individual person. So cared-for community cats cannot be desexed. The law demands they be allowed to breed. Councils won't take them in; most councils won't even record data about cats. So here we are in a situation that seems farcical but is, in fact, an awful tragedy.

The CHAIR: Thank you both for those opening statements and for all the work you're doing for animals as well.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Thank you to all three of you for participating and bringing your expertise and experiences, which very much help us in our work. Ms Vesk, I want to pick up on the point that you made about the vet shortage, and my colleague the Hon. Peter Primrose raised this earlier today. The Hon. Peter Primrose and I are on an inquiry into the vet shortage and we were in Inverell yesterday. I'd be keen to learn a little bit more about the impact and the consequence in terms of what you're seeing and doing.

KRISTINA VESK: I'm really glad that there are members of the Committee across both, because so many of these issues intersect and they're contributing to each other. Issues around inadequacy of pound services are affecting work by vets because they're having animals dumped on them. At the same time, issues for us in terms of providing shelter are being hampered by the vet shortage. There's so much crossover, so I really appreciate that you're across both of them.

For us at the moment, where it's getting really critical is the fact that delays to desexing mean another litter of kittens is born. Cats' fertility is enormous and their pregnancies are quite short. As I said, last year we helped over 2,000 cats to be desexed. But if even just, say, 500 cats had a waiting time of six weeks or eight weeks, they could all have kittens. Maybe you want to come in here as well, Ms Atkin. I feel like we've been able to kind of keep a lid on this for years and we can't anymore. We just can't keep up because, even with all the vets and all their work, they don't have the hours in the day. There aren't enough vets. When we also have cats who we're compelled by law to not desex, and they are being allowed to breed, it's a disaster. So that's one side of it, but just the capacity of vet clinics is really having an impact because cats are being born.

DIANA RAYMENT: One of the big barriers that we see in Australia in this specific area, particularly with vets working in the shelter space—there's a couple, and they all relate to each other, the first being that shelter medicine is not actually recognised as a speciality in Australia. As a general rule, vets come into the sector as new grads. They work in the sector for a while. They're not trained in specific techniques that would actually help in the sector—so high-quality, high-volume spay-neuter isn't widely taught. Our vet schools are very hesitant to

teach it because it's something that's quite new for us, even though it's been around for a long time in the States. That compounds itself because what happens is we keep losing the knowledge and the skills over and over again from those vets, because they come in, they learn and they leave, rather than actually having a source where we can keep that information and then pass it on to new vets.

Additionally, we've got a bit of a quirk in Australia. In other countries, vet techs—so people with an undergraduate degree in veterinary technology—can give full health checks and they can give vaccinations. It's not legal here. So where, in other countries, we can have vet techs go out and they can do community days where they vaccinate, they microchip, they health-check animals and the vets can stay back and they can do the high-quality, high-volume spay-neuter, that doesn't happen in Australia because we legally need the vets to be out there doing that. We're not currently using our vets. We don't have enough and we're driving them off, because we're not taking care of them when they're in the system, but also we're not leveraging them as well as we could be.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Another issue that has come up is cost-of-living pressures and the consequences for pet owners. What are you seeing in terms of increased demand for service and increased need?

DIANA RAYMENT: We do have some specific data from New South Wales from our Home2Home program in our submission. What we're seeing as a trend—and that is in New South Wales and across all of the other States—is an increased demand on our crisis care service and also an increase in the percentage of people, when they're seeking care, who are seeking care because of financial constraints or because of accommodation. Typically, what that looks like is, "We've lost our house; we can't afford our mortgage. We're moving back in with Mum and Dad, and so we've got three generations in one home and too many pets to be in the household." That's very much the case for those owned pets. Then we end up having a conversation with people about, "How much time have you got before you move back in with Mum and Dad? Can we actually get your pet adopted out?"

But also we're seeing a lot of issues—and I feel like Ms Vesk might be best placed to talk to this—with people who care for cats. There are a lot of cats in the community and, typically, those cats are located primarily in low socio-economic areas. People take on the cats because they care. They start caring for them; they recognise that this cat needs to be desexed. They can't make the choice between, "Do I desex the cat or do I make sure my kids have got school lunch this week?" Even if they could—even if we handed them a \$150 voucher to go to a vet clinic—oftentimes they can't access a vet. So there's this situation where we've got people who are contacting us and saying, "Hey, we've taking care of this cat for six months. It's had a litter. I've found homes for the kittens, who are all going out undesexed, and I'm afraid that the cat is going to get pregnant. What do I do?"

It's a matter of trying to find—if we get lucky, they're in one of the councils who are part of Keeping Cats Safe at Home or a council that's signed on to NDN, and then sometimes we can use funding to just desex the cat for them and then leave it there. That's the cheapest way to deal with this—desex the cat, hand it back. It costs a lot to bring these cats into care. That happens sometimes, if we get lucky, but more often than not it's a case of trying to say, "Okay, what options have you got? Can you care for this cat in place? Let's see if we can find somebody who can help you get it desexed." There's a big disconnect between what the community needs and what the services are that are actually available to keep the pets out of the system.

KRISTINA VESK: I think that the issue about cost for desexing—we certainly have a lot of programs, and we can usually find something to help someone with that affordably. But, as I said, the issue is whether or not they're able to register that cat themselves. But Nerida can probably speak better to some of the calls that we've been getting about—so there's the issue about housing. You're combining households, so suddenly you're combining animals. We do a lot of counselling on that, and then there's just literally being not able to afford to keep your pet anymore. Do you want to talk about any of the calls that we get?

NERIDA ATKIN: We try to document our calls, so we would have some of these on record. But we've recently even been getting people just calling us because they can't afford to feed their pet—so they're asking can we provide them with free food, even if it's just for a couple of weeks while they get their next pay cheque or whatever it is—or people having to move because they can't afford the place they live in now and the new place they live in is not pet friendly, which, unfortunately, is a lot of places in New South Wales.

We're also getting people evicted and then they're homeless. They might have cats and dogs and other pets, plus their children, and they just can't afford to keep the cat anymore. They want to, but they just don't have anywhere to go. They're homeless now, so the only way for them to get into a refuge is to not have those pets. We need to also be looking at what are people's options when they are in domestic violence situations or they are evicted—getting the refuges, places that are animal friendly, so these people can keep their cats. They then might work with organisations like us to get the pets desexed or to get that little bit of food they need or whatever it is.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: This question is to both the Cat Protection Society and PetRescue. In terms of the associated Acts—that is, the Companion Animals Act and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act—is there anything you'd like to see changed in those Acts that would facilitate or—

KRISTINA VESK: I don't think we have enough time.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Apparently yes! But that's what we are here for, so go ahead.

KRISTINA VESK: Oh my goodness. Yes. That's the short answer—yes. The long answer would take too long. Insofar as the pounds issue goes, I think that the regulation of pounds and shelters is something quite discrete. We don't have a regulation for it. Councils should be responsible for their pound services, but it's kind of like, "Oh no, that comes under POCTAA." There need to be standards, there need to be guidelines and there needs to be a decent system in place so that we can have some reliability of what people can expect and so that animals can have an experience that isn't—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Just tease that out for me a little bit. So the operation and administration of the pounds is council, in practice, but the statutory accountability is under the—

KRISTINA VESK: Primary Industries, under the—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: And you see that as a bit of a disconnect in terms of—

KRISTINA VESK: It seems a bit crazy that you have a function of Local Government, which is to provide a pound service, and that is recognised as a function of Local Government, but anything that happens there is a function of Primary Industries under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. Then you have things like—I think it's called—the Impounding Act, or something like that, where dogs and cats and shopping trolleys are in the same piece of legislation. It just doesn't make sense. We have been through this in other inquiries as well, relating to POCTAA. It tries to cover such a broad spectrum of things with this one, huge instrument, and it is inadequately served by either an absence of or very outdated regulations. But I think, in terms of immediate change for cats, we just need an exemption so that they do not have to be registered to an individual—that they can be registered to a program or something. Because otherwise, as it stands, we are literally forcing cats to breed.

The councils won't pick them up; they won't impound them. So they are there and they are breeding. There are people who care about them and want to look after their welfare and would be prepared to take them to the vet, and we are prepared to pay for that, and the vet is prepared to do the surgery, and when the vaccine shortage is no longer we can vaccinate them and improve feline public health, but we can't do that. Surely we are in a bizarre situation where the law is compelling us to make the situation worse. I've been trying to think about something analogous. I know that councils are—we want cats to be contained. They have this utopian view that that's—but they are just ignoring the population of homeless cats. They are real, they are there, and people do care about them. There is no social licence to just kill them. Quite frankly, even if there were, how much money and time would that take? It's easier, quicker, safer and much more humane to allow the people who care for them and who are trusted by those cats—to be collected and trapped, to be taken to the vets to desex them, and then we can start improving this situation. But we are making it worse.

The councils don't collect data, so when they say these things—they will only collect data at the point where the legislation says so, like a complaint about a nuisance cat. So we know that if councils get a call about a cat, they will say, "There's nothing we can do", and hang up. They don't even record that they got that call. They could be getting thousands of calls a year about cats in their LGA and no-one knows because it is not recorded. We are trying to ask councils to capture data for us so that we can target this program, but they won't do it. They don't have the resources. The fantasy about cats all living this ideal life—they are contained, they are all desexed, they are all owned by one person—it's not real. It's a bit like saying, "No-one should take drugs", and then eventually we got safe injecting rooms, because harm minimisation is a legitimate policy option. So it's not saying that cats living on the street is the best thing in the world for them, but it is better and it minimises harm. I think we need to shift our thinking to that.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: What gives council the confidence to say, "Sorry, we can't deal with that", when someone rings up about a stray cat?

KRISTINA VESK: They will point back to the Companion Animals Act and say, "Cats are allowed to not be on their own property." The councils who are now saying that they want that changed so that the cats are confined—my question to them is how are they going to police that? They are not doing anything now, so where are all these rangers going to come from to police that? What will they do with the cat—not the person but the cat? We can legislate the behaviour of people, but it's more difficult to legislate the behaviour of cats, particularly when they are not owned by a person. I think it's just being a little bit more realistic about what's really there and taking a longer term view. To be honest, it's a lot of buck-passing. It's like, "Oh, we'd be perfect, except the law

fails us." No, it doesn't fail you, councils. There are a lot of things you can do, and there are a lot of councils who make a lot of effort.

I don't think everything sits in the legislation. A lot does, and it can be improved. As a matter of urgency, we would like there to be capacity to desex cats without having to register them to an individual natural person. But, apart from that, I think there is a wealth of information that has been made available, particularly in the past couple of years through inquiries, to guide policy in these areas. I'm not saying it's easy, but a lot of the things just come down to will and effort.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Let's just loop back a bit. I'm happy for you to jump in at will. Don't feel like you can't; it's fine. But on that related point, in your view, as the subject matter experts, are councils best placed to manage this problem if the legislative framework was backing them in?

DIANA RAYMENT: If I can, I'd like to give a little bit of big-picture context and then two specific things that I would suggest would be good to look at. At the moment, the way that the system works is everything is built around animal management, which is what falls under the current legislation. Animal management itself is reactive. What that means is that we look at issues in the community and then we say, "Okay, let's find the owner." It's a user-pays system. The primary thought process behind animal management was that if there are animals out and about in the community who are causing a nuisance, we go, we round them up, we provide a service and then we make the owner pay for that service, which is why it's assumed to be cost neutral. That's a problem because, at that point in time, everything that is built around that is also reactive by nature, because if you are rounding up animals something has to happen to them.

This is where we've got shelters, this is where we've got rescues and this is where we've built this ginormous system that is based on the premise that we round up animals who are causing a nuisance. Now, in terms of how we change the legislation and how we actually, like I said, reimagine that, we need to work out where the responsibility lies for the proactive stuff. How do we actually enable councils and local government to go out and dedicate money, not just to enforcing and rounding up pets and taking them into care? Because right now everything is linked to getting heads through the door. All the funding for shelters, all the funding for rescues and all the funding for councils are linked to that core function of bringing animals in. So decouple it. Literally take it back and say, "Okay, we have a certain amount of funding." This is available for animal management, based on our population or based on good data about the actual companion animal population in that area.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Sorry, just to jump in. Data seems to be a big issue in and of itself.

DIANA RAYMENT: Huge. That's the second thing. So one is really delineating where those responsibilities actually lie, not for the reactive stuff but for the proactive stuff, because right now people are doing it but they are doing it despite the system, not because of the system. The way that we do that is to have very good data that we can actually look at. Local government is not in a position to be able to do that. In order to actually collect the resolution of data that we need to be able to say, "This is a problem area. This is our problem", we need to have a State-based system that actually says to councils, "This is what we need you to collect." Whether that's like a shelter animals count basic matrix or a framework that we're actually pulling the information that we need, you collect it, we bring it together, we look at it and we then give you information about where your high-intake areas are. Most councils know this. If you talk to AMOs, they know it, but the council systems that they're working with oftentimes have two and sometimes even three different computer systems they're using to try and do their job. Nobody is collating it. Sometimes they're not even collecting it.

What that means is everybody's got opinions about what we should be doing. "We need more money, we need more this and we need more that." And it's like, "Yeah, okay. That's how it feels to you because you're on the ground right now, but we don't actually have the data that we need." So getting the State to actually create that system to collect the data, to be able to use that data well, then to drive practice based on what we're actually seeing in the system, and then delineating whose responsibility it actually is to do that—bearing in mind that we need that proactive side—is usually cheaper. When you look at individual situations, almost all of the time it is cheaper to just keep the animal in place, support them in place and minimise the number of animals who are coming into the system. But nobody can do it because, at the moment, they don't have funding or the funding is tied to bringing the actual animal into care, and that's a huge barrier.

KRISTINA VESK: I agree with that, particularly the point about the data collection being State based, because, for a start, people are really mobile, so they're moving with their pets. They might have registered their pet one place and then they've moved somewhere else. It also gets to a point, I think, where there's such a hyper-focus on attaching every dollar and cost recovery to where someone lives that, "Oh well, this cat was picked up on that road even though their normal place of residence is that", and then there is a fight between which council is responsible. Really, just get the cat home. Don't impound them; get them home. It is usually a dog in

those situations because most councils won't pick up cats. Just get them home. Don't fuss about—the amount of money spent on trying to recover costs would probably far outweigh the fees that they charge. It is not worth it.

You also have the issue that the LGAs most burdened tend to be low socio-economic, rural and regional. They don't have the funds, but I think designing supports that are holistic and delivered at a local level—because I do think councils have a lot of expertise through their staff and their elected councillors in knowing their area. I think that's a really important resource to tap into. But I think there was something we put into the veterinary workforce inquiry about having community centres that embrace community, which includes pets. So it can do a whole lot of things. It's not about compliance. It's not about punishment. It's about providing services in your community, in that one-welfare context, and building bonds of community, because pets are a fantastic social lubricant and they often help people to have conversations that might be difficult otherwise.

I think local councils have a hugely important role to play because they know their communities. But I think there are issues for the State to play as well, because the demarcations and the inequities of funding and need mean that you need a much higher level approach and the data collection and the consistency of that. And collect it from organisations like us and from rescue groups as well because we don't have a complete picture. We would happily give our data, but I don't know who to give it to. But it is important to collect that.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Is there any cutting-edge jurisdiction that is doing this in an exemplary way, either in Australia or overseas?

DIANA RAYMENT: Overseas it's definitely more of a thing than it is in Australia, and it's generally been a movement. If we look at the US, in particular, there are individual local governments over there that do a pretty exceptional job of proactively supporting. Typically, if you wanted to look at examples of that, if you look at the Human Animal Support Services project, which is run as a not-for-profit support for local governments who are changing the way that they do things, they have a number of pilot shelters. Those shelters are run by local government, and they are essentially implementing this.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Are they implementing the US system?

DIANA RAYMENT: They're implementing a very data-driven proactive approach. There are core pillars to that, which are some of the things we have spoken about—foster first care of animals, keeping pets at home where you can, really ramping up your pet reunification with their owner services—and what they're seeing as a result is a dramatic drop in the number of animals who are coming into the shelters, which then increases the capacity of the shelter.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Was this part of anyone's submission?

DIANA RAYMENT: Yes, we referenced it in ours, and if you ask Nell Thompson—this afternoon—about it, she will be able to give you more information as well. The thing, I suppose, to keep in mind is that the process of implementing it—we've got the old system, the new system and what we want it to look like; there is an overlap. That is the tricky part because we've still got to keep the old system running until we get the new one going, and the new one is going to cost money. But the aim is to eventually get to a system where we're spending the money better so it is not seen as "We've still got all this enforcement, and then we've got to add all this extra funding on top." Yes, we do need to do that for a finite period, and then we can be using our money much better and it becomes more sustainable.

The CHAIR: Cat Protection received a \$1.5 million grant recently—from the previous Government—around desexing. Could you give us an update on where that is up to? Also, if we are going to see a significant drop in the number of unwanted litters, what kind of funding is needed to drive the desexing program that is really needed in that space?

KRISTINA VESK: It is hard to estimate the funding. At the moment, what is really hampering us—yes, we received the grant on just 29 June or something, and it is for two years. Until we received it, we couldn't really go ahead, but we'd done a lot of thinking and a draft plan and so on. Initially the work was focused on bringing more vets on board and talking to the councils. The problem that we face is—the vet workforce shortage is really difficult—getting enough vets on board, and then the issue of only being able to desex cats who are then being registered to an individual person. Some councils have limits on how many cats a person might be allowed to own, and sometimes that's quite low. No good deed goes unpunished: If someone wants to desex the cats who are living in their back lane and being cared for, they could be fined because they've got more cats than allowed.

There are a lot of people who are afraid of registration and identification for reasons of privacy and fear who might have quite traumatic backgrounds. This is another huge barrier. We are making progress, and it is wonderful helping people—and my colleague who is a project manager is here today—but I think the part that is really hurting is that we are being stymied and that we know there is work we could do with that. The other part,

of course, is not getting the information that we need from councils to target it. They want us to do things for them, but it's harder to get them to actually partner properly and put some stuff in there. So like, "We'll pay the vet bills, but your resident is ringing you. Can you take down this information?" "Well, no." You know, it's frustrating.

In terms of funds, I think that—again, I don't want to make an estimate, but we do quite well with what we do have. We could do more with more, but we definitely need more vets. I know that we would have, because we have in the past, incredibly increased demand if we could bring those costs down to almost nothing. When we went half-price Adopt-a-Stray, which normally is \$100—we did it half price for a few weeks at \$50 and demand quadrupled. That tells you that cost is a big issue. Our survey on cat welfare that we commissioned through Ipsos tells us cost is an issue, so definitely there is a need for subsidy, but I can't really estimate the entirety of the cost. I don't think it's necessarily ridiculous, but it's going to keep growing if we keep doing what we're doing now. We are just making the cost bigger.

NERIDA ATKIN: I think a way that the vet shortage impacts that is there's a number of our vets at the moment who have about a two-month wait time for desexing. If that's a female cat, she's had a litter again and that person has to then go, "Well, what do I do with those kittens?" A lot of people still don't understand that a mum can fall pregnant by her son, or a sister by a brother, so then you've got that issue as well. They might be keeping them inside, but if you've got a mixed litter of genders then you've got another pregnant female and then that cat has to get desexed as well. That's definitely impacting a lot on the number of cats we need to be desexed because we just can't get them in quick enough to be desexed on time.

The CHAIR: That makes a lot of sense, thank you. I also quickly wanted to ask you about the difficulty of assessing a cat's behaviour and understanding whether this is a domestic cat when they actually do end up in the pounds. There's absolutely no requirements around behavioural assessments. Dogs are also heavily affected. I have heard that it could be anything from a professional behaviour assessor that goes through a whole range of situations in a foster care system, or it could be poking a dog with a stick through a cage. Obviously, cats, if they're in fear, may respond by hissing or growling or trying to scratch because they're in fear. Can you just talk a little bit about the problems there and what you'd like to see this Committee do to try to untangle that? I know that there's no actual proper behaviour assessment that we know is an effective behaviour assessment, but what can we do to make sure that these animals aren't being put down because of terrible assessments? I'll get something briefly from both of you, if that's all right.

DIANA RAYMENT: I might start with that and then pass over to the Cat Protection Society. This is my PhD topic, so this is an area where I'm quite passionate. If there's one thing that we could do to really aid and assist—obviously, there's a lot to be done in terms of staff training and how we actually handle animals and what criteria we set, but the primary core issue for a lot of these cases is that the actual conditions in which we are assessing are just poor. There is no other way to describe it. The Association of Shelter Veterinarians has a fantastic document, which is guidelines for humane care for short-term care in shelters, and those guidelines are well above and beyond any criteria or any standards that are set in Australia.

You are bringing an animal into care. You're putting it into conditions that we know will change behaviour significantly, and then we're making judgements on how that animal will respond outside in a less intense stressful environment based on that behaviour. It's not as easy as saying, "These are the conditions that we need", because it's expensive to provide those conditions, and when you've got too many animals in the system that then creates a snowball effect, so you need to wind back. But we have to, first and foremost, look at the conditions in which the animals are actually being kept or being held, fix that; that will then have flow-on effects. If in the meantime we can be driving down the actual number of animals who are coming through the system and upskilling our workforce, then we can actually, genuinely, probably implement some of the things that we do really need to implement at that finer level of, "This is what we need you to be looking for", and know that the people have got the skills to be able to do it.

For cats, in particular, my rule is they just shouldn't be in care unless they absolutely need to be there. It is incredibly difficult, even with fantastic conditions, to tell the difference. There's some great research that's come out of the States about how to do that and it takes a minimum of several days, but in the meantime cats are getting sick. This was a case that I generally thought about mentioning in our opening statements, which is a much-loved cat who came into the Home2Home program and their owner ran out of time. They went into a facility here in New South Wales. At the time they were admitted, an application actually came through to adopt that cat and so there was a swapping of details. We've got an adopter. This cat has somebody who actually wants to adopt them. Just because the cat was so stressed in care, it ended up developing a urinary blockage and was dead before the adopters could come and get it. That happens in a period of days with cats, so you need to keep them out. The priority has to be to not actually bring them into these facilities in the first place because you're immediately

putting them in a situation which will cause disease, will cause stress, and increases the likelihood that they're just going to die.

NERIDA ATKIN: I think a big thing is looking at fear-free options for training for staff in shelters and pounds. We at Cat Protection have all our staff and volunteers trained in fear-free methods. Basically, what you're trying to do is reduce the stress levels, especially for cats, because they're so good at masking what they really feel. What you're wanting to do is reduce that stress in the first place and trying not to put a blanket rule of what behaviours should be expected of a cat. I think that's a hurdle, but it's also something that needs to be done. We assess every cat on its own merit. You need to know a rough idea of the background of a cat. If you're bringing in a cat that's just been trapped by someone in the backyard, even if it's the friendliest little fluffy ball that lives next door, they're going to be so stressed, so anxious, in a trap and then taken into a pound facility where there are dogs barking, there are 20, 30, other cats crammed into small enclosures. Any cat is going to be stressed in that environment.

It goes back to data collection—try and find out as much information as possible about that cat and then try and work out a way to assess their behaviour, but it can't be on initial entry. It's got to be seven days later, 14 days later, when the cat's had time to chill and you've tried to find its person and get them home first. You've also got to look at the initial vet treatment that's given to cats. We've collected cats from pound facilities who aren't even flea and worm treated seven to 14 days after being taken to that facility. If you've got a cat who's been lost—and they are microchipped, they do have an owner somewhere, but because they've been lost for a set amount of time haven't been flea treated and have severe flea infestation. They're distressed by that as well as them being taken into a pound facility. You need to give them, when they first arrive, some sort of vet treatment, the initial flea-worm treatment, a health check, and then look at the behaviour post that sort of stuff. You've got to manage all that before you can look at their behaviour.

KRISTINA VESK: Can I just add to that, too? Nerida mentioned people need to be trained, consistently and regularly, and the environment which Diana Rayment mentioned. There's no point assessing any animal in an environment that is so awful that the animal is reacting to that.

The CHAIR: Thank you again for all the work that you're doing. I know that you're all very busy in this very difficult space. If there were any questions taken on notice, or if the Committee has any further questions, the Committee secretariat will be in contact. We thank you again for making the time to give evidence today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Dr ROSEMARY ELLIOTT, President, Sentient, The Veterinary Institute for Animal Ethics, sworn and examined

Dr ALEX KEOUGH, Practice Owner, Lake Road Veterinary Hospital, sworn and examined

Ms PRISCILLA WILLCOCKSON, Registered Veterinary Nurse and Rehoming Coordinator, Lake Road Vet Rescue, affirmed and examined

Dr SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS, Veterinary Surgeon, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our next witnesses. I thank you all for giving the time to give evidence today. Is there an opening statement from Sentient?

ROSEMARY ELLIOTT: Yes. The pound and shelter system is broken. The volume of animals presenting exceeds the capacity to care for them and the demand for rehoming. Opening hours are limited and some refuse to accept animals. This increases pressure on the private veterinary system to hold and care for animals at their own expense. The annual rate of what is referred to as euthanasia but is largely convenience killing is still too high: around 32 per cent of cats and 9 per cent of dogs. This is justified by the view that death is not a welfare issue, providing animals are killed humanely. I think it's time to challenge this.

As a society we have accepted a culture of killing as a necessary and valid option to manage too many lost, relinquished or unowned animals. This only masks our failure to properly conceptualise and fund a restructure of our broken system by implementing evidence-based alternatives. Depriving healthy animals of their lives is a moral issue and causes moral distress to all involved, made worse by its lack of acknowledgement. Distressing examples include the common practice in shelters of killing kittens who are below a certain body weight, despite being in good health, and the late spaying of pregnant cats followed by the killing of their full-term kittens. The deaths of these neonates are usually not included in the figures for reporting death rates in care.

Traditional pounds and shelters cannot meet the welfare needs of animals. The longer they're impounded, the more likely they are to develop infectious diseases and behavioural problems and the less likely they are to be successfully rehomed. Even worse, there is evidence of both neglect and overt cruelty to animals in some council pounds. Examples include being underweight; kept in filthy, crowded conditions; suffering from untreated diseases and parasite burdens; harsh handling; and even being unlawfully shot by council officers. Then there are the unseen victims of this situation: owners whose pets have strayed or been relinquished due to hardship and lack of support.

There are multiple causes of these problems. Socio-economic hardship, such as cost-of-living and housing crises, is associated with an increase in pet relinquishment, a drop in adoptions and poor animal management. State Government funding is inadequate. The prevailing culture within the pound system is to regard animals as a nuisance to be managed and to treat their owners officiously rather than supporting them in the care of their pets. The lack of oversight of pounds, such as by routine inspections, leaves animals at risk of mistreatment. Behavioural assessments conducted in pounds and shelters are inherently flawed, reducing their validity and condemning animals to death who could otherwise be successfully rehomed. Perhaps the biggest cause of where we now find ourselves is our continued reliance on an outdated model that institutionalises rather than rehabilitates animals.

Sentient advocates a widescale shift to transfer animals out of pounds and shelters and into a State Government-funded and managed foster care system, in collaboration with reputable animal charities and rescue organisations. This will save lives, provide safer environments for animals, meet their psychological and behavioural needs, increase adoption avenues, free up space for short-term stays in shelters, and improve staff morale. Such a transition will require a well conceptualised and consistent model based on what has been effective internationally. We advocate for the establishment of a State animal welfare commission to oversee and staff council pounds, standardise pounds and shelters, and coordinate a move towards fostering as the primary means of caring for animals who need rehoming.

The CHAIR: Is there an opening statement from Lake Road Veterinary Hospital?

ALEX KEOUGH: Yes. I'm a vet practice owner and companion animal foster carer. I'm here today with my senior theatre nurse and rescue coordinator, Priscilla. Our practice is the only 24-hour hospital west of the Hume Highway that we are aware of. We provide emergency veterinary services to the far north and west of New South Wales and northern regions of Victoria. We are here to raise concerns about the current pound situation from our veterinary perspective, but we also have the added bonus of being a registered rehoming organisation. Our main concerns relate to the significant burden that strays, wildlife and orphan animals have on our practice, especially given the mental health and workforce shortages.

Our community believe that local government-operated shelters are responsible for the care of strays, wildlife and orphan animals, but this is not the case. Our advice from our local rangers is that they are not animal advocates but they are regulators and enforcers of the legislation that only relates to dogs. The community also presume that care and services that are not provided by the shelter that are provided by private veterinary practices are government funded, which is not the case. We have our own in-house rehoming organisation, which is fully funded by our day-to-day business operations. Our staff love what we do and volunteer to provide the veterinary services and work as economically as possible, but, regardless, our business is still expected to pay full government taxes, payroll tax, council contributions, council rates, water rates and training fees for all of our staff, who then provide services to these unowned animals.

At present, our small business provides services like education services to schools and day cares, and we also run a disability program. We provide wildlife veterinary services and rehab. We identify owners of stray animals and reunite them 24 hours a day. We provide 24-hour emergency care for injured animals but also take seized animals from police when there are homeless people or domestic violence situations. There were 73 this year. We also rehome orphaned animals, strays, patients that are surrendered to us and other seized animals. Again, that's 922 this year. This work comes at a significant financial cost, but the physical and emotional toll on our team is also significant. We love what we do, but there's got to be a better way forward.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Pollard-Williams, did you have an opening statement you wanted to give?

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: Yes, I do have an opening statement. I would also like to table the abstract of a paper looking at a One Health approach to pound management and addressing unintended harms and maximising benefits.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: I'm a veterinary surgeon. I've spent the majority of my working life in clinical practice and, for the last decade, teaching at Charles Sturt University in Wagga. I've worked in regional Australia for six years, and the clinic services the local pound three times a week. The immediate environment is the major influence on animal behaviour at any moment in time. For an animal to be removed from its home environment to a pound is extremely stressful for that animal. The noise, smells, sights and the presence of many other animals are confounding and confronting. Therefore, it's essential that pound staff are aware of this problem and are trained to recognise the signs of tension in animals. An untrained staff may inadvertently exacerbate animal stress during handling.

As a result of this stress, behavioural assessment of impounded animals is complicated and may be unreliable. There seems to be no uniform system used to assess temperaments in animals from pounds prior to rehoming. The RSPCA statistics for 2021-22 show that 78 per cent of dogs killed at New South Wales pounds are done so because of behavioural problems that may in fact be poorly diagnosed. Impounded animals benefit from enrichment, including having contact with humans and conspecifics, in the case of dogs, and housing designed for their particular needs. Cats are frequently misunderstood in their behaviour. Fear is the main driver for aggression in both species. Broader education for pound staff and rangers in animal behaviour and low-stress handling is needed and should be mandatory.

There were two widely reported cases of live cats being put in the freezer at the Wagga pound and only one was rescued. Rangers could expand their roles and investigate reported instances of animal cruelty, and staff should provide community education on animal needs, particularly to potential animal adopters. There are many needs that are addressed by other submissions, such as expanded ranger services, much higher funding and subsidised desexing of companion animal. A colleague had the hideous task of killing 42 cats and kittens in one day on a visit to a small regional pound. After that, I organised a few days of low-cost cat desexing, and the demand was absolutely intense. There is no doubt that the operation of pounds needs a major review at local and State level. A shift in culture towards LGA animal management involving education and support, rather than a punitive approach, is needed. Human and animal welfare are inextricably linked.

The CHAIR: Thank you to all of you for the amazing work that you're doing, particularly under the circumstances. A few of us are also on an inquiry into the veterinary shortage, so we've already been talking about the overlap with this inquiry as well. We know that there's a veterinary shortage. I've got two questions to begin with, and this is to any of you. First of all, what are some of the solutions that we need to see in regards to that veterinary shortage? Dr Pollard-Williams, you just gave a horrific account of a vet going into a council and having to euthanise over 40 kittens.

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: Cats and kittens, yes.

The CHAIR: This is obviously highly stressful work. I have heard that there are council pounds where there is no vet in the region that the pound is in, or where there is a vet, but the vet doesn't want to work there,

which is completely understandable if that's what's going to be required of them. What do we need to change within the pound system? First of all, we need to, obviously, get more vets. But what do we need to change in the pound system so that it's not putting vets in these stressful and really difficult situations? I recognise that, unfortunately, vets also have one of the highest suicide rates of any profession. We spoke to the AVA, who also talked about the fact that one of the reasons that it is so highly stressful is—they said it was not actually euthanasia in these circumstances. It's actually killing the animals because they are healthy animals, which they don't consider to be euthanasia, which is a compassionate action. That is a big question, but do any of you have thoughts about what recommendations you would like to see in the report from these committees around the veterinary shortage but also improving the whole pound system so that it's easier for vets to work in?

ALEX KEOUGH: I don't want to get too off-topic with the vet shortage, because it is a passion of mine. But in terms of the vet shortage, there's two main issues which are impacting the mental health of vets, which are, obviously, euthanising healthy animals—that is quite emotionally distressing—but the other one is client expectations of vets and having unreasonable expectations of vets. I think the big thing that has been avoided is why are vets so petrified of client expectations. The root cause is they're worried they're going to get sued, and they're worried they're going to go to the vet board.

The reality is that, in New South Wales, 100 per cent of client complaints are investigated through the vet board. It doesn't matter whether, like in some of the more public cases, you've amputated the wrong leg, or whether you've done a perfectly good job with a patient; if the owner leaves the hospital unhappy, dissatisfied with a financial issue, the way a nurse or an admin staff has dealt with them, that then escalates and becomes a board complaint. The board complaint then directly comes back to one individual vet. That could be the vet who was in charge that day, or who saw that patient. Or that could be the superintendent of the hospital, who has never even met that owner or that patient.

For me, we hire a lot of vets and a lot of new grads. They're absolutely petrified of the vet board. I've literally just lost a vet, who has been with us for 12 months, because they're so petrified of the vet board and the possibility of a complaint after they didn't answer their phone at 1.00 a.m. They missed a call at 1.00 a.m. Then that spiralled out of control that they were so worried there was going to be a board complaint because they missed a call from our staff calling them in for an emergency. Now I've lost a full-time employee because that's the level of fear that is instilled into them.

As a practice owner, I try to encourage them that not every owner is going to complain, and the world's a nice place. But I also can't protect them when—I've got a lady at the moment who I was supposed to deal with today, but I'm here, where her brachycephalic dog has died of pneumonia after being desexed. After the fact, we found out that it had pneumonia; we didn't know that prior to surgery. The desex went well, but it's then died of a brachycephalic-related disease; but she's out for blood. Now I've got to work through the team. I've never met the owner, never met the dog, but I'm the superintendent so it's my head on the chopping block. But that's off the topic of the pounds—

The CHAIR: It's still important.

ALEX KEOUGH: But that's where the vets are going. They just don't want to be vets because they're scared they're going to get sued. Like I say, everyone is putting all this pressure onto the fact that it's the client expectations—but it's the client expectations, and the root cause is the legalities. The actual euthanising of healthy animals—hat is still definitely a big issue.

ROSEMARY ELLIOTT: I think that's a very valid point and very moving. I would like to also talk about that from the point of the veterinary workforce shortage and the concerns we have about the welfare of animals in pounds, but I want to add shelters to this. A lot of things happen in shelters that cause moral distress to vets.

The CHAIR: Sorry, can I just interrupt you to get a clarification of your idea about the difference between a shelter and a pound?

ROSEMARY ELLIOTT: The pounds are council-run and their brief is really not animal welfare; it's animal management. The shelters are run by charities, and they usually have a vet clinic, whether a large or a small one, attached to them. They've got an animal welfare focus, and they do lots of other wonderful things like education and community support and stuff. Your question was about the veterinary workforce shortage and how we could help with that. I think that links very nicely into this inquiry into the welfare, and not just the welfare but the ethics of how animals are managed in pounds and shelters.

I want to use the example of cats. Particularly during the cat season—spring and summer—pounds and shelters are completely inundated with cats who are picked up. Female cats are often pregnant or at various stages of pregnancy, and they're not able to manage them all. I know Sentient has a long-term goal, and it's going to take a long time for a transition to the foster system. I think one of the big issues is moral distress in the veterinary

practice and the veterinary profession. I would hate to see the really caring, sensitive vets who think about welfare issues and ethics actually leaving. The advantage of my position is that, you know, I've only worked in one practice. I've done a lot of other things, and I'm moving into animal behaviour. But we have members who've worked for years in veterinary practice. They've owned practices et cetera.

I've recently been dealing with one of our members who is in another State in a major shelter run by a charity, and there is actually no defined point—I guess what I want to say in summary is vets need to be able to exercise conscientious objection on moral grounds. They are bullied and harassed to do late-term spays, and I'm talking really late term. There is no defined cut-off at what point you should not spay a cat who's pregnant. If a vet refuses, they're called into management, they are bullied, they are threatened with their shifts being changed or their role being changed, and then another vet who is either willing or bullied into doing it does it, and then the cat is at a later stage of her pregnancy. It's a really despicable situation.

There's no consistency either in what is done with the unborn kittens. Some of them are injected. I mean it can actually become like caesarean surgery. I have an example of one of our members who refused, was told that the cat would be allowed to give birth—she was already producing milk. She came back into work two days later. A new grad had performed this, freaked out, didn't know what to do, could have actually spayed the cat and allowed the kittens to live—they were actually full term—but fumbled around with trying to inject them in the uterus.

I've also heard of a uterus being thrown into the bin without the cats being injected. They can live for 30 minutes. They die of suffocation. They either go in the bin as waste or they go in the fridge. These are horrific examples and they break the spirits. They had a TAFE student watching this. They had a vet nurse in absolute distress. This is the stuff that needs to be addressed. In terms of the front end, we have to obviously get into the desexing. I think Professor Rand presented some wonderful results at the last hearing you did of community desexing programs that were funded. They had a licence to desex and release them into community-owned situations. It brings down the euthanasia rates and it brings down the intake rates.

But these shouldn't just be research projects that come up here and there. We need dedicated funding to fix it at that end. But I think once cats are coming in—there are people who would love to foster with a bit of financial assistance. They are experts at rearing neonates. We have to think beyond this killing, and even where we've got the killing, we don't have any defined—my colleague was asked to photograph evidence that she saw milk being produced when she squeezed the teats. The bullying of this clinician, of others, in a charity-run shelter is appalling. I can only think of what it would be like for a cat to go in for surgery, being psychologically prepared to suckle and rear kittens and there are no kittens. It's just got to stop.

The CHAIR: Dr Pollard-Williams, do you have anything to add?

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: I think, in terms of the workforce shortage, something else that needs to be mentioned is online victimisation of vets because that is also a very big issue. There are no filters on what people put out there on social media. It takes one disgruntled person who can really shoot down somebody's reputation online and then everybody else goes piling in to agree with them. That's probably what I'd say on that front. We heard some great comments from the previous group about the cat issue, but the cat issue is absolutely a very serious issue and needs to be taken very significantly as an issue to be addressed right across the board.

The CHAIR: I have one other question. In the submission by the Lake Road vets—and thank you for coming all the way here—you talked a little bit about some of the issues that you were having with rangers. This is something we've heard a little bit about with this kind of real disconnect with rangers and their position. Can you talk a little bit about whether there's sufficient oversight of rangers? I know that you've also said that your local pound is only open three hours a day. I would be keen to know what pressure that actually puts on the veterinary surgery to take in animals and house them for a period of time, and what we need to be doing in regard to that ranger space and whether they need more training and skills in animal welfare as well.

ALEX KEOUGH: The situation for us is pretty disastrous. We're open 24 hours a day and the pound's open three hours a day. We do 21 hours worth of work. That being said, even when they are open, they refuse to take cats. It's very difficult for them to take dogs. If someone's got a dog that they can't care for or housing situations, domestic violence, homelessness, their website talks about a surrender process and they can surrender them at a fee but they won't take surrenders. That's a bit of an issue. They do have a system where there are drop boxes and—love them or hate them—metal cubes where you open the door, put the animal in and then shut it, but it's only for dogs, not cats. But they are only open on Friday and Saturday nights. The rest of the week they're locked because they actually don't want the animals in their care. They want to keep the numbers down for infection control and they don't have to look after as many animals, I guess. So there's a real push to just not let them in the door in the first place. We find that really challenging. What was the rest of your question?

The CHAIR: It is about rangers and whether there is sufficient oversight of rangers, whether they need some kind of animal welfare training.

ALEX KEOUGH: There are not many of them and they do parking. I don't work for council; I don't know. There seems to be about half-a-dozen. I think there are two that are specifically just at the shelter—of varying levels of training. I think the ones at the shelter genuinely are trying to do the right thing, but they're sort of bound by what their bosses and higher-ups are telling them and the resources they have and the funding and the rules they have to follow. Similar to what Sarah was saying about the online bullying, we've had a lot of conflict with our council about what to say to people when they bring animals to us the other 21 hours. We sort of try to push them back to hold on to the animal, take them to the shelter when the shelter's open, if the drop boxes are open, and twice now we've had really horrific social media backlash to the point of greater than 500 messages.

We've had to close several days a week for mental health. We've had to call in psychiatrists, psychologists to work through the team because of council, in effect, throwing us under the bus with regard to where to send them. We're only following the instructions they've told us previously. We've had staff that don't feel comfortable wearing their work uniform downtown because of the backlash. That has happened twice now. It's just variable. Again, talking about board complaints, we had a ranger report us to the board for not taking a stray one time. I was like, "That's your deal, not our deal." The drama goes on.

The CHAIR: People are sort of just pushing it onto others.

ALEX KEOUGH: Pushing the responsibility. The other thing is, if push comes to shove, they'll take a dog but they won't take a cat. They sure as hell won't take a rabbit or a bird or a pig or a lamb or a sheep or a goat. We're not just limited to cats and dogs where we are; there's everything. Ferrets are a common one. What do you do with a ferret?

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: Could I just make a comment about the ranger training, please? In my initial submission I did mention the certificate IV in companion animal services. That has now—of course, because I didn't check—been superseded by the cert IV in animal behaviour and welfare, which is very, very focused on the type of information that would be phenomenally useful for rangers and all pound workers to have at their fingertips. There are a number of core subjects. There are a number of elective subjects, but really you could steer it towards making sure that people had some experience in recognising signs of tension in animals, in low-stress handling techniques, and actually being aware about the welfare needs of animals in pounds—dogs, cats, any other species—because largely those at the moment aren't addressed in terms of their environmental needs at the absolute start, let alone their social and behavioural needs.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Thank you for attending today. My question was to do with the actual rehoming centres, but then, as you've been talking, I thought that I should actually reframe my question to how do you prevent animals from ending up in rehoming? What kinds of measures would you have or would you suggest?

ALEX KEOUGH: Preventing them from entering the system—is that what you're trying to say?

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Yes.

ALEX KEOUGH: In terms of preventing them from getting into the system, I don't know. In terms of once they enter the system, the first thing we can do is to get them back to their bloody owners. Look up their microchip. Do you know how many animals go through the shelters that have microchips and owner details on them? You've just got to scan them. The second issue is the microchip databases. How many are there? There has to be six, seven or eight. If there aren't eight, there has to be 15. There are so many databases. Vet practices and vet practice staff are not taught how to mine data. We are taught that the Pet Registry—if you go on there, there is something there or there is something not. But, realistically, if a member of the public brings in an animal, they think that the microchip is the be-all and end-all. We scan it with a chip and we go, "Huh, it's got a chip. Wish us luck", because the reality is that for less than 50 per cent of microchips we can actually track an owner down—actually have accurate data on them.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Is that because they are not updated—as in, their information?

ALEX KEOUGH: They are either not registered, there is no information on that chip, or the information on the chip is the breeder—that is a crazy number. If it is the actual owner, is the data correct? I reckon you could run the stats on it. Less than 25 per cent would actually have the correct owner, the correct details, the correct address and the correct phone number. That being said, if that means that 25 per cent of animals, as soon as they enter the system, can go straight back out—sweet, let's do that. But I think there is no emphasis, especially with our shelter. The emphasis is on not letting them into the system by just deferring them or, if they are in the system,

just getting them out to a rescue group and, in effect, using and abusing not-for-profits and non-government organisations—just flick them out of the system. I think that's a bit excessive as well. But there is this middle ground where we've got this system called microchip—use it.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Do you think the Pet Register—would the Office of Local Government assist with that? I know they are trialling it at the moment, but have you had any information?

ALEX KEOUGH: It seems to have a lot of upgrades and it seems to be down a lot. That's definitely probably our biggest struggle. The other thing is that we can't update the information. I don't know whether that would be—we can mark whether a dog is desexed or not, but if we've got an owner in front of us and everything is above board and they have moved out and got a new phone number, it just seems like we could kill two birds with one stone. That being said, I don't think it's our job or our responsibility. But, equally, maybe there is some way that we could be efficient in trying to update systems.

The other thing is that most practices have a digital database these days and you can get integrations and APIs and things so that they talk with other systems. I imagine it wouldn't be too much of a stretch of the imagination to have some sort of API connection where the databases could talk. I don't know how that works. But, again, our personal vet practice database is more reliable than the Pet Registry database. We will obviously look up a microchip on the database and we will have no success, and then we will look up our own database and that has a little bit more of a chance of finding the owner.

ROSEMARY ELLIOTT: I was interested in the number of organisations that, in their submissions, talked about extending the range of owners—let's put it in brackets—who could be listed on a microchip, and that that could include an animal welfare organisation. That would fit in nicely with the whole thing of community cat programs being—I'm sure the council funding is inadequate, but it would be good to think about a preventative model rather than just fixing it once they come in. I think we need a lot of really targeted desexing programs, particularly in areas of low socio-economic status, because people are struggling and they can't afford all of this. It should not be at the expense of veterinary practices; it should be funding so that vets could be paid their normal amount, or whatever they want.

I think if we have this targeted program where you've got community semi-owned cats—by the community—then you wouldn't list owners, but you would perhaps list an associated rescue group or animal welfare organisation. The other thing I'm thinking is that money would be better spent helping people who are underprivileged to have their cats desexed, to have their cats microchipped and to have registration costs waived—all that kind of thing. You are preventing this influx during the cat and kitten season; you're also preventing dogs from going missing, or at least they can go back. So many dogs are just stray and they've got no identification. There is somebody out there grieving for them and we don't know who they are.

It just puts so much pressure on the system once you get to the pound and shelter and vet practice. I'm just so impressed by what Alex and Priscilla have presented, and that's an example of a vet practice doing two jobs. It's just not sustainable. I think the funding needs to help. You could easily identify where most of it—I think Professor Rand said that most of the cats were coming from underprivileged areas and they were owned cats.

ALEX KEOUGH: There already are systems in place for mandatory microchipping, desexing and registration. That legislation already exists, but it's not upheld. Again, for us, if councils aren't going to enforce it, then there are knock-on effects.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So it is mandatory to microchip. When does the legislation mandate that? If you think about the supply of animals, Mr and Mrs Jones go and buy a cat from a pet shop or whatever and then the cat breeds, is there a requirement to chip the mother and the offspring?

ALEX KEOUGH: They can't be advertised without a microchip number. If they were born in your house, they are not microchipped, but as soon as they are eight weeks—look, I'm not fully up to spec with this, but my understanding is that once they exit at eight weeks they have to be microchipped. But they also have to have a microchip number to be advertised on any of the rehoming platforms.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So the onus is on the owner to do this, but it's not enforceable because it's just too hard.

ALEX KEOUGH: Yes.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Is there anyone that has solved this problem elsewhere?

ALEX KEOUGH: No, but it's not just microchipping; there are even just impound fees. Our shelter—"Oh don't worry, that's so-and-so. He is a regular. Just shoot him back to his family." Yes, but that's the fifth time he's been in. If you enforced the actual rules that are already there—again, if we are talking about it from an

economical point of view, if our shelter is taking in 1,200 animals a year, and most of them are owned and we are dishing out the appropriate fines, there is actually some money there to build better facilities and do mental health assessments—on the dogs! Yes, but it's not consistent. That's the issue. There are rules there, the legislation is there, but no-one follows it. So we just see them when they are six months old and they have never been microchipped.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I suppose the problem is that you could get chipped at the point of supply, but then when they go and breed, how do you monitor that?

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: Could I make a little comment about that, related to my discount cat desexing? I'm looking at exactly this issue. When my colleague had had this horrific experience of having to euthanise the 42 cats and kittens on one day—and bear in mind we went to the pound three days a week, and whoever got the short straw had to go to the pound, because it was the kill run, basically. I organised these very cheap desexing days for cats. I think we put in place that they had to be receiving some kind of government support payment in order to qualify for this.

It is a totally unsustainable model because we all donated our time, but the things that came out of that were that the vast majority of these cats had never been to a vet clinic before. They were not desexed, they were not vaccinated, they were not flea treated and they were not dewormed. Most people had got the cats because their friend's cat had had kittens and they had given the cats away, and most of these cats had had previous litters. So there was just this endless cycle of poorly managed—in a legislative term, we would say they were not responsibly owned. But, as soon as these people had the opportunity to have a low-cost desexing, bang, they were in. They really wanted to do something for these pets. Then we found that once they'd been able to get them desexed they thought, "Maybe I could deworm it. Maybe I could vaccinate it as well." So we tended to offer that as an additional discounted service. But that kind of thing is quite unsustainable for vet clinics to provide—I think, as Alex would agree.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Dr Pollard-Williams, you mentioned the "punitive nature" in your opening statement. Could you expand on what you mean by that? Are you talking about enforcing fines?

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: Yes. I'm talking about enforcing fines, and, as Alex has mentioned, in many LGAs rangers are using the legislation to go, "We have got this dog. It's not desexed. It's not microchipped. Yes, we know who the owner is." The fee to that owner—by the time they have desexed it, microchipped it and done all of that stuff—is several hundred dollars, which people cannot necessarily produce in the short term. The fact is that the rangers are then not at all interested in trying to mediate a way around getting that dog back to that family and allowing that dog to continue to live.

I had the most heartbreaking experience whereby we had a dog into the clinic—and this was when I was working where we serviced the local pound. The dog had a minor surgical procedure because it had an accident. We stitched it up. The owners didn't have enough money to pay. We kept the dog, we kept the dog and we kept the dog. Finally, after about four weeks, we said, "If you can't come and collect your dog and pay your bill"—and we hadn't charged them the additional \$40 a day rate—"we will send the dog to the pound." So the dog went to the pound, and a week later my colleague came back and said, "I just euthanised that dog, Ben." He'd come in as a family pet. They'd agreed to have the treatment done. They couldn't afford to collect him from the vet. They couldn't afford to collect him from the pound. The dog died.

This happens all the time. That's why I refer it to as a punitive approach, because there's not a, "Hey, we've got a problem; let's negotiate and try and fix it." But, obviously, fixing it is going to require money from somewhere; I'm well aware of that. At the same time, having had the experience of trying to offer cheap desexing, as soon as there was something there, people were champing at the bit to get in and get on the list. Then we had some funding from RSPCA, and we had some funding from private donors who bequeathed, so we actually utilised that to continue that in the clinic at a slightly cheaper rate for people.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: The terms of reference at (e) read "factors influencing the number of animals ending up in New South Wales pounds, and strategies for reducing these numbers". I touch on what we have just spoken about in terms of cost and that very sad and confronting experience regarding the payment for the treatment undergone by the dog. Dr Elliott, I refer to your submission where, in the third paragraph, you talk about the cost-of-living and housing crises. It would be helpful to get a bit more insight into cost-of-living pressures and the consequence for pets.

ROSEMARY ELLIOTT: Traditionally, most animals were lost or stray. There are more animals being relinquished now by owners because of cost-of-living pressures. A lot of people cannot afford to pay their rent or cope, but the other problem is our rental laws are not pet friendly. They sort of are, but you still need permission from the owner, and then all the people in the strata can have a chip in and a say. And, particularly if you've got a

medium- to large-size animal such as a dog or a particular breed, it is not easy. It's not easy to get a rental property at all, and when you throw in an animal you are disadvantaged. So that's one of the problems. The other thing in terms of animals being lost, stray and whatever it is, even when they are microchipped and the owners are located, they have got to pay a relinquishment fee—what do you call the fee of getting the dog back? A lot of people can't pay that. So there are a lot of reasons why people who are struggling financially are not able to keep their dogs or reclaim their—the reclaim fee is what I meant to say.

The councils are not enforcing the whole desexing thing. There's not enough capacity to do that, so there are people who have got undesexed animals that are breeding. This is adding to the problem as well. We've got this piecemeal approach. You hear of wonderful organisations like the ones presented here today who have done low-cost desexing. That's at a cost to their practice, so that's not going to help the veterinary situation. And they are getting little bits of grants here and there. I don't know why there's not funding through the Government, through the councils—however that works—to actually prevent this happening. Because this is one of the biggest reasons why animals are ending up in pounds: it is the uncontrolled breeding and the lack of enforcement of registration and microchipping.

For people who are struggling and particularly people who have had to leave a home due to domestic violence, some of the shelters will take animals. Not all of them will. We need a whole suite of measures to protect. You need pet-friendly rental laws. You need—really, for people who are disadvantaged, they can't pay for this. Why can't we help them with this and pay—I'm not talking about people just claiming they are disadvantaged. There's got to be proof. But have the desexing paid for by the Government, whether through the council or whatever. I think this is a very large reason why we are getting so many animals presenting to pounds and shelters. It's not that people don't care; it's that people can't pay.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: How do we solve this? The essence of the problem is that you have a population out there that you don't really have a handle on. How do we ascertain how many animals are out there, even if the microchip system is functional and people are doing what they are supposed to do? Clearly, they are not. That's part of the problem. After they are breeding, how do you monitor whether people are doing the right thing? Has anyone come up with a solution to this? Dr Pollard-Williams, in this paper you have presented, I notice it says there is the One Welfare concept used in the World Organisation for Animal Health. Have they have come up with a strategy?

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: Unfortunately, not yet. I think the issue, particularly with cats, is that a lot of people are still not going to comply with those requirements of microchipping and registration, because, if they have a limited amount of money and they are offered a service at a discount, they will probably take the desexing over the microchipping and registration. A lot of people who utilised our cheap desexing service were very worried that we would then give the information to the local council, and they would be pinged for having an unregistered animal. So this is part and parcel of this. We need a more holistic approach, and we need to take an approach of a bit more carrot and a bit less stick, really.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: You could maybe have a system where the Government took on microchipping, and then people could bring animals in for free microchipping.

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: Currently in Wagga Wagga there are some sessions run by another charity, Paws for A Purpose, and they offer very discounted microchipping and vaccinations. I think it's \$15 for a vaccine and \$15 for a microchip—I'm not entirely sure what the current rates are—and there are queues out through the door to have that done.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That would indicate that people will do the right thing.

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: Yes, people will do the right thing. It's just the cost, and the cost is one of the main reasons stopping people reclaiming animals from pounds.

ALEX KEOUGH: I guess the only issue, when we are doing those programs, is that if people are getting vaccinated on the cheap then that's undermining small business and they're not building an ongoing relationship with a practice to then care for them when they are sick down the track. We're very for microchipping and vaccinating, but I think it's probably more proactive if the Government subsidised or did some sort of funding of desexing or vaccination.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Yes. When I say "the Government", I didn't mean necessarily insourcing all of it, but yes.

ALEX KEOUGH: Yes, just because then they're building a relationship with the practice, but I think most of these people are low socio-economic. They've got mental health issues themselves and they're using animals as a means to self-medicate. But, again, if their dog gets impounded and they can't afford to get it vetted

and the in-pound fees to get out, I don't know of any shelters that are doing payment plans or Afterpay or VetPay or Zip Pay. Every other industry in Australia seems to be doing payment plan options. It would be great if the Government can afford it, but I also get that the Government can't pay for everything.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: No.

ALEX KEOUGH: Even if it was payment plan options, or it was added to their rates or something else, then there's a way to still recoup the money. But, regardless, desexing a cat in a lot of practices is only a couple of hundred bucks. I don't know how much—a lot of councils, and we can't even get the information out of our own council, but how much money and resources are going into a lot of their shelters and pound facilities, and even public grants.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That's the thing. It's a vicious cycle.

ALEX KEOUGH: It's like if you divide that by the number of animals, we can desex the cat three times over. We might as well desex it once—we've got less cats and we're still ahead. It's pretty simple maths if you worked out the costs.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: What do people do now commonly in the situation where they have a litter of cats? Aside from giving them away to friends, do they just go and dump them in the bush?

ALEX KEOUGH: They dump them on our doorstep at night.

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: Dump them at the clinic. I've had very small kittens, still with umbilical cords attached, dumped in a bucket on my clinic doorstep.

ALEX KEOUGH: Yes. That's like a hundred cats a year—kittens like this big.

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: It's a lot.

ALEX KEOUGH: And we hand-raise them at all hours of the day and night. We look a little weathered but that's because we're feeding kittens.

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: But the other thing to remember is that those owners who can't afford to relinquish their dog, or can't afford to pay to get their dog out of the pound, I should say, will probably go and get another one.

ALEX KEOUGH: That is exactly the issue—they go get another one.

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: You're not stopping the human behaviour at all.

ALEX KEOUGH: You're better off with that animal—

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: You're better off to try and nurture that one animal, one owner relationship.

ALEX KEOUGH: Yes, and even if the grants or government subsidies were one patient per person, that limits it. Plenty of people with mental health issues have 10, but at least if it was one then it's fair. But, yes, that's the thing: You're better off with that one staffy living with that one family than it then rampaging in the pound and stirring up all the other dogs and ending up on death row and then affecting—the other thing is the strays. When we were taking strays, we were taking I think four or five hundred a year. A lot of these dogs are actually dangerous, injuring our staff. We had a nurse slip a disc in her back and there was a whole icare investigation, and it's not even our dog.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Essentially, the system's producing a production line for death row.

ALEX KEOUGH: Yes.

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: Yes.

ALEX KEOUGH: And not supporting the animals staying with their family or getting back to their family or the responsible ownership with that family—like, start, middle, finish.

ROSEMARY ELLIOTT: And the impact on the morale of veterinary staff—nurses, vets, practice managers, animal attendants. It's just a dreadful vicious cycle.

ALEX KEOUGH: Vets won't work at practices—that's a question you get asked: Do you do the pound work? "Oh, okay, because if you don't do the pound work, you're an option for me to work for you." If you do the pound work, then vets won't work for you.

The CHAIR: Fair enough, too.

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: Sorry, could I just say one last thing about another area where pounds are not meeting the requirement? The other thing that happens at the Wagga pound is that there are two local charity groups that pick up a lot of animals from that pound. In one instance I could say that the number I was given quite recently—just before COVID—was 200 animals a year were taken out of the pound to this local charity. All those animals that were microchipped were transferred over into the name of the lady running that charity, and it is then her responsibility to transfer it all over with the OLG when she rehomes those animals. The issue there is the pounds are just sliding these animals off into the system—the other parts of the system—and they're doing all the legwork—at considerable cost to themselves, too—to actually get those animals into homes.

The CHAIR: Can I just ask one quick follow-up on that because it's just reminded me of something that I have heard about all the paperwork. If you're giving this animal to the rehoming group and then that rehoming group is rehoming those animals, is it true that this paperwork is still all handwritten paperwork that is then hand-delivered to the council and that it can take many, many months for that animal to be put through the system and transferred?

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: Yes.

The CHAIR: Does that all need to just become electronic?

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: Oh, it would make life heaps easier if it was electronic.

ALEX KEOUGH: I don't want us, as vet practices, to have to do that, but it's also very frustrating when they're on their third home and the paper trail hasn't caught up, or the paper trail gets lost.

The CHAIR: Because it's still sitting at council, potentially, for a year.

ALEX KEOUGH: Again, council could just give us five bucks to lodge the paperwork, or something, and they're probably saving 100 bucks per dog or something. But we get asked to write—I don't know if it's other people—certificates so that owners don't have to pay full registration fees to own an entire dog. I don't know if that's actually just a thing for us locally

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: No, no.

ALEX KEOUGH: I have a real issue with it. But our pound accepts that—that a vet can write a letter saying, "I recommend that your dog doesn't get desexed."

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: Until it's one year of age.

ALEX KEOUGH: Until it's one or two or whatever, and the pound accepts that. I'm thinking, the whole point, whether we're for or against delayed desexing for all the different pros and cons of the health benefits or not benefits, why should I, as a vet, be writing a letter that undermines the legislation that I'm trying to encourage that says desex your pet or register it by six months? But that's the shit uphill we have to fight every day. We write that and then councils say, "If you don't like that, go to a different practice". Again, that undermines us, and we look like the arseholes because we're trying to follow the rules. We don't mind if you have an entire dog at 10 months of age, but pay the goddamn full registration fees. That's an increased risk on our community, having an entire dog in the community. For puppies, they get hit by a car, they end up with us. It's a risk mitigation issue. I don't care whether you're entire or not.

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: Can I make a comment about that too? Have we got time?

The CHAIR: That's alright.

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: The other with that is that with local councils—I'll just give you an example. The last dog that I acquired, I actually acquired it from a breeder because she had not made the cut for showing and breeding. So I got in the car and came home with an entire female whippet. Of course, the first thing I did was desex her. I went into the local council with the desexing paperwork and a letter written by a colleague saying, "We've advocated this. The whippet wasn't desexed until 15 months because blah, blah, blah." Then it was incredibly difficult to actually get her registered as a desexed animal because I'd brought her home as an entire animal, and there was this sort of fiasco in the local council office in Wagga. She had to be registered as entire and then they said, "We're going to change it later." I never bothered to follow up on that—what she's at, what she's linked to on the New South Wales registry. At this stage, I don't care because she's desexed. It's just ridiculously hard.

ALEX KEOUGH: The only other thing to add to that—and Priscilla deals with this. The patience she has! As a rehoming organisation, we can't actually look up and see what patients are in our care. We get fined by council for not transferring a microchip in a timely fashion, and we're thinking, "Who the hell even is this dog?" There's no way of being able to look up the database and look at all the patients who are in our care—like I say,

it's over 600—and making sure that they're actually transferred to the correct owners. Do you have anything to say on that, Priscilla?

PRISCILLA WILLCOCKSON: It's so unreliable that I send council photocopies of the change of ownership forms so that I've got that one piece of paper as proof that we've got the signed form, and I just keep photocopying it each week, fortnight, month and sending it in until it gets changed. I rehomed two 14-year-old dogs. It took almost two years to get their details changed. They were kind of risking being deceased before the change of ownership was actually updated.

The CHAIR: Wow! That's just such a mess.

PRISCILLA WILLCOCKSON: Lucky they probably couldn't get out and roam around and be at large.

SARAH POLLARD-WILLIAMS: If they get lost during that time and we're the last person, then we're the one who's responsible, as the rehoming organisation, for them being hit by a car or crashing someone else's car or biting someone else's dog or child. We're liable during that period.

The CHAIR: And it's just because there's this bank-up from council?

ALEX KEOUGH: Yes.

PRISCILLA WILLCOCKSON: It might be manageable when we're looking at rehoming 20 or 30 animals a year, but when we're up around 500 it's a midnight job.

ALEX KEOUGH: I think that's the thing. We're at over 500, pushing 600, animals—just cats and dogs—that we've rehomed this year. Our local shelter has done 1,100 and they've got a shelter. I say "shelter" but I just try to encourage positive vibes; they're a pound. They've got, I don't know, six or eight rangers. They've got a facility. That's their full-time job for however many staff they've got, and we're doing half that as a hobby at night as well as running—our practice is estimated to be a practice that requires 10 to 15 full-time vet equivalents. We're running off four.

The CHAIR: Thank you, all, for coming in today. We have gone over time.

ALEX KEOUGH: Sorry.

The CHAIR: But that was all really important, so thank you for staying back. I'm not sure if there were any questions on notice, but if there were the secretariat will be in contact with you. If the Committee has any follow-up questions, they will be in contact with you about those as well. Thank you again for the amazing work you're doing and for taking the time out to come here and give evidence. It's been extremely useful.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

Ms NELL THOMPSON, Coordinator, Getting 2 Zero, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. I welcome our next witness and thank her for coming in today. Do you have an opening statement that you would like to give?

NELL THOMPSON: I do. I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today. I also pay my respects to Elders past and present, and to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people here today. Getting 2 Zero is a national program providing free remote and onsite consulting and support services for local government, not-for-profits and community groups to keep people and their pets together and improve outcomes for lost and homeless animals in every community in Australia. G2Z advocates for community solutions to be developed for community problems.

The animal welfare movement grew in response to a lack of animal protection laws, and companion animal management was born of the need for local authorities to deal with community health, safety and amenity problems that related to stray and irresponsibly owned animals. Since then, changing values in relation to how animals and people should be treated have brought the two sectors closer together. While some of the aims of companion animal management have not changed, the way the community expects it to be delivered has changed substantially. As well, the animal welfare and shelter sectors have recognised that companion animal welfare is better when animals don't cause harm or nuisance to others.

Consideration of both animals and community needs is necessary. Although primary reasons for existence may vary, both sectors are moving towards a shared strategic approach and, being community services, they need to evolve with the community. What we're talking about during this inquiry is not just about welfare or management or regulations or enforcement. For the most part it's about people and their, or other people's, pets. It's about empathy, compassion and equality for people and their pets. It's about ensuring that disadvantage does not create more disadvantage. The last 20 years had seen a surge in academic interest in these related sectors, largely due to the close relationship that's held with human health and social science. We now have a rapidly advancing, robust body of evidence to work with when developing everything from policy to processes, from facility design to service provision. We no longer need to rely on how things were done or guess at solutions to common issues.

Companion animal management generally falls under the jurisdiction of local governments and may be shared with not-for-profits. However, both sectors lack resources to implement prevention and support strategies. Government can help by supporting councils to implement community engagement and support programs that will improve animal welfare and management outcomes that are in line with social expectations and that also provide environmental benefits. Animal management is a community service that needs investment. Funds could be redirected from punitive strategies towards these aims.

In closing, my family have adopted several dogs that were transferred from New South Wales to other States as the only option for a live release outcome. These were lovely dogs that originally belonged to another family. Somewhere along the line, a judgement call was made that the original family may not have been good enough to have their pet returned to them. It may have been for many reasons, but we could safely bet that most of them could have been resolved with the utilisation of the principles of social justice.

The CHAIR: Getting 2 Zero means getting to zero euthanasia within our pounds—or am I wrong?

NELL THOMPSON: Not only anymore. I think 15 years ago that might have been the case. But now we're also focusing as much on preventing intake. So it's getting to zero animals needing to come into—

The CHAIR: Zero pounds.

NELL THOMPSON: That's right—animals needing to come into the system.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. In which case, what are the main things that the State Government can do to reduce that euthanasia rate further and reduce the number of animals entering the pound system?

NELL THOMPSON: I think that the system needs to be taken apart. We need to view it from a front-end approach, rather than a back-end approach. At the moment we are reactionary. We're dealing with the problem after the fact. We're spending \$34 million a year in New South Wales, or thereabouts, on the back end when the problem's already happened. If we could change our thinking to a front-end approach and deal with the issues of why animals are coming in—yes, money still needs to be spent on municipal and not-for-profit shelters. There will always be that need. But it will not be nearly as much as it is now.

The CHAIR: We've talked a lot in this inquiry about laws around breeding, backyard breeding, registration and microchips, the fact people aren't doing that, the length of time for council to pay for work, and

the fact that there are no standards, currently, for council pounds. As a committee, where do we start to tackle this problem? What are those top things, as far as recommendations in the report, do you think we need to be doing as a priority?

NELL THOMPSON: We need to look at what the actual problems are in each community. That goes to the need for more robust data. We've mentioned that in our submission and some suggestions around that. But a lot of the time we don't actually know what the problem is. For example, we talk about backyard breeding. What does that actually mean? Is that people intentionally breeding a dog for financial purposes? Or is it that someone's dog became pregnant and then they were left with a litter of puppies and so on? We don't actually know what the starting point is, so we do need more information there.

I think we can safely assume, based on the body of evidence that we're starting to get out of Australia—particularly in relation to cats, thanks to Dr Jacque Rand and Dr Gemma Ma—and from overseas, particularly the United States of America, which is culturally very similar to the situation that we have here, we know that people need help to be the owners that we need them to be—we, in the sector of company animal management and welfare. How do you help them to do that? We've done that for people with children—help them to be better parents. We've given them the services to that—child care, baby clinics, things like that. We don't have that yet for animals. Animals will always be part of people's families. We cannot keep making this judgement call: If you can't afford it, you can't have it. People are going to have pets.

The CHAIR: Absolutely. One of your recommendations is to implement strategies to divert homeless cats away from the pound system into more humane and socially acceptable alternatives. Can you expand on this a bit more for us? Are you talking about large desexing programs? Obviously, there's going to be a lot more layers to a program like that.

NELL THOMPSON: Yes, there are. I guess that's one of the things. The term that you just used, "homeless cats"—are they homeless or do they have a home? It may not be the home that you and I provide for our pet cats, but it may still be a home. So once again we need to identify that. If they're semi-owned cats, perhaps we could offer desexing, as Cat Protection Society of NSW are doing, and return it to the location in which it lives. The family that is probably caring for it perhaps might need a bit more support to do that, but are quite happy to have it residing in their shed or wherever it might be. So the provision of free desexing—yes, we've had discussions around people who are having difficulty with financial considerations. But if a cat is not desexed, it doesn't matter who owns it or what their income level is, it's going to get pregnant if it's a female, so we need to desex it. If we put more focus on those preventative strategies—and, yes, we have a vet shortage—perhaps there are other things we can investigate around short-term drug interventions. There's quite a bit of research that needs to happen in that area as well.

The CHAIR: Do you have any thoughts around subsidised vet care for people on lower incomes, for example? It's come up a lot in this inquiry, first of all about the vet shortage and the pressure on vets, and then we hear very difficult stories from the vets who are left with animals who are potentially healthy, or who with \$2,000 could potentially become a very healthy animal but with people who can't afford it, and the stress on them. Do we need some kind of—I don't want to use the word "veticare" too much because I think people have different ideas about what a veticare system is—subsidised vet care system so that vets can do that work but reclaim some of those costs so that people who do have lower incomes can actually get that vet care at a lower cost? What will that change for vets and what will that change for the pound system and for animals?

NELL THOMPSON: Absolutely. I do think that is a good option to investigate. My background is in the veterinary industry, as a vet nurse. I worked in emergency and critical care for some time and financially based euthanasia was an everyday occurrence—every day—which is obviously very distressing for the staff. We know one of the reasons that people are leaving that sector is mental health so it would definitely take the pressure off there. And then definitely for the municipal and not-for-profit shelters, they get animals in all the time. There are lots of programs happening around Australia where people are surrendering their pet that needs health care and then someone is fixing it up and then adopting it out to someone else. That's a crazy way to use money. We could adopt a different animal out to those people, fix this one and give it back to the family that already loved it.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Similar to some of the previous lines of inquiry, it seems to me like this is a bit all over the place. Obviously you have the issue of microchipping and getting the accurate data and keeping a handle on how big the population is and all the rest of it, but in terms of the uncontrolled breeding that goes on out into the never-never, which seems to me like a thornier problem, why isn't there mandatory desexing required at the supply points?

NELL THOMPSON: Mandatory desexing and mandatory containment sound like they're silver bullets. They really do. When I first heard about them 20 years ago I thought, "Fantastic! Let's all get onto this." It is not, and I'm talking specifically about cats at the moment because, really, this is everyone's biggest problem. We could

just talk about cats all day. The majority, 70-odd per cent, of cats being intaked to a municipal or not-for-profit shelter are unowned or semi-owned, so any mandatory compliance legislation approach is not going to affect them at all. All it's going to mean is that they come into that facility, no-one reclaims them, they're not social enough to be rehomed and so they are killed.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: But in terms of where that supply of those cats originated—if you kind of wind it back to where the supply points are—how does it happen? Let's just say, as a bit of an experiment, as inhumane as it might be, we euthanised all the excess population and we started from scratch. In theory, if you were to mandate desexing at all the supply points, wherever that is—pet shops, breeders, pounds, whatever—you would then stop the multiplication, wouldn't you, of the population?

NELL THOMPSON: Once again, it's a good theory. I think desexing absolutely must be mandatory for any pet that is sold from a shelter or a pet shop.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Is it now?

NELL THOMPSON: Not as far as I'm aware. My understanding is that it is not in New South Wales, and it does need to be, absolutely. But if we're talking about pets that are rehomed from the community—so my cat has a litter and I give a kitten to my next door neighbours—any legislation isn't going to necessarily impact those animals. We don't have enough resources within local government to be able to monitor that. But also if I, as a lower income community member, cannot afford to comply with the legislation, is that equitable? Can we actually implement legislation that is not equitable—that people can't actually afford to comply with? We need some way to impact the problem around that. Supportive strategies are much more effective and have been shown to be much more effective. We don't have any evidence at all that mandatory containment or mandatory desexing has any positive effect at all, using any criteria. There is just no evidence for it. Putting money into those strategies at the moment would not be an evidence-based approach.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Do you know of any other jurisdictions that have tried that?

NELL THOMPSON: Absolutely. Yes. My home State is Victoria. We have mandatory desexing and mandatory containment in a number of councils—over 20. In 27, or something like that. The data that you can get out of them—once again, we have a problem with data collection—there is no evidence that it has had any positive impact whatsoever. In fact, in the majority of cases it has driven up their intake and put more pressure on capacity.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That mandatory desexing, at what point is that implemented?

NELL THOMPSON: At registration. So, once again, it's missing out the majority of cats.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I suspected that might be the problem.

The CHAIR: I have a quick follow-up question because one thing that's come to our attention as well, and I think it was something that was fairly well meaning initially, was to increase the cost of registering a cat that's desexed later in life. The idea behind that obviously is to say, "Get your cat desexed earlier", which is a good thing. However, when we start to look at these semi-owned cats, if somebody then wants one of those cats to become an owned cat or to desex that cat and register or microchip that cat, we're now putting a financial burden on somebody so they're even less likely to want to desex and register that cat.

NELL THOMPSON: Exactly.

The CHAIR: Do we need to change that?

NELL THOMPSON: Yes.

The CHAIR: Is that something we need to put as a recommendation?

NELL THOMPSON: Yes. In the perfect world—we'll go back to the perfect world—once we've looked at all our data, we've identified what the issues are in whichever community it is, we then need to drill down and remove the barriers to a solution, and that is definitely one of the barriers to a solution. If people are happy to take on a semi-owned cat, let's make it as easy as possible—free desexing, free microchipping, free registration, so we've got it on the records. We then have a bit more data. We need to then think about, as another issue, what is the purpose of registration. Why do we want it? What are we getting out of it? But let's say we want it for a data perspective—let's do whatever we can. So we might spend \$200—a reasonable amount—to desex a female, do all those things and give it back to that person. We could intake it into the system, and after the holding period we will have spent potentially \$600 to \$1,000 on it. If we're talking economics, it's a much cheaper option to provide those supportive strategies at the front end.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That's interesting. Has anyone done an economic analysis on this?

NELL THOMPSON: We are starting to get research in that area at the moment. Dr Jacquie Rand has a lot of information on the financial aspect of things. In fact, at the conference that we ran in October, the Getting 2 Zero summit, we had the Australian Institute of Animal Management and AMRRIC partnering with us. We had quite a few presenters talking about the social and financial side of things. So, if you would like more information on that, I can certainly get you some.

The CHAIR: Could you table whatever documents that you potentially have?

NELL THOMPSON: Yes.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Thank you for coming. You mentioned punitive strategies. I just wanted you to expand what you mean by "punitive strategies", because then I've got some other questions, depending on what you—

NELL THOMPSON: Yes. At the moment, if my dog or cat gets out, is picked up by council, ends up in the shelter, I need to go and reclaim it. It may not be desexed, microchipped, registered, all of those sorts of things. Do I have the money to do that? Or am I going to leave that dog or cat with you for that time? And then you have to work out what to do with it. That is punitive. That's a barrier to me reclaiming. Or even just my pet gets out, first time. I get fines and then all of the other things. "You haven't microchipped it. You haven't registered." We are not in any way advocating that we take the stick away. There will be times when the stick is needed. But it shouldn't be the first approach. There are lots of programs around where first time out gets a free ride home, that kind of thing.

If we remove those punitive barriers, we also—most local governments, I believe, don't have a real understanding of what that process costs them. The process of fining, chasing up the fines, then potential warrants, all of those sorts of thing, costs a huge amount of money. If we could spend that money once again on the front end, help people—"There's a hole in your fence. You need to do this, that or that. Did you know this? We're working with you." That sort of approach is much cheaper and gets the community on board with once again being the owners that we need them to be.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: In your executive summary you've said some recommendations, and you've got number 2, "Re-evaluate the existing intake system." I imagine you're saying to take away the punitive side of the current system. You've asked us to explore the feasibility. What would you, if you had the magic wand, use as an intake system there?

NELL THOMPSON: Focusing on intake reduction. If we could imagine every AMO have got a microchip scanner in the car, they've got fluorescent signs that they can put up in the area so every animal is scanned and, if it's not, it doesn't have a chip or not traceable, then the person who's found it—"Could you hang onto it for 24 hours?" We know that most dogs are reclaimed, if they're going to be, within 48 hours. We utilise a website. If you have a look at the Facebook pages for any community—the majority of dogs are reclaimed or find their way home through those. So utilise those community networks and strategies. "Could you hang onto it for a day?" "Yeah, sure. He's getting along with Sammy in the backyard. No problem."

If it's a cat—"Could you hang onto it?" The evidence shows that it probably lives within a couple of blocks of where it's found. They don't really stray very far. Intake reduction, the whole time. What can we do to keep it out of? Can we give that first ride home free? When we do send animals home from Reclaim, are we sending them home with a collar and an ID tag? We can have an ID tag printer in the office, and councils like Cairns City Council do this. They send them home with it. So we're preventing that problem from happening again. Preventative actions.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: It reminds me of my dog. Had a little name and phone number so, usually, people would ring me and say, "Lily has turned up."

NELL THOMPSON: Exactly.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I'd say, "I'm at work." They'd say, "We're happy for you to come afterwards." So I get where you're going with that one. Then you've got recommendation number 10—I think it ties in with 2—"owner support services". I think you answered that in a way by saying the first time the dog had strayed—or the cat—providing the owner with some sort of a tag or something. Can you expand on that one a little bit more as well?

NELL THOMPSON: Yes. At the moment, councils might be doing doorknocking to find unregistered pets. What if we flip that around and we still do doorknocking and we say, "Have you got a cat or a dog? What can we do to help you? Is it vaccinated? Is it microchipped? Is it desexed? Do you need a collar? Do you need a tag? Do you need help, fixing that fence? What do you need to be the owner that I need you to be?" It's just

flipping that narrative around once again, rather than banging on the door. "Is your pet registered?" People are just hiding their pets. "Not meant to have them anyway, because I'm in a rental." That sort of thing.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Where would you see the funds for these kinds of recommendations coming from? Would it be local council in their rates? How would you see some funding so that these things could be implemented?

NELL THOMPSON: At the moment, we're spending money anyway. We're spending a lot of money: \$34-odd million. But, with all due respect, we're probably not spending it wisely. So we could change the way that money is spent and still within that budget that we have. But I think the other thing is too that we need to look at animal management as a core service, just as libraries are, pools are, community centres are. I don't have kids, but my rates go towards the local day care, the playgrounds, all that sort of thing. I have no problem with that. There was an idea, floated a few years ago now, by the ex-president of the Australian Institute of Animal Management, who said, "What if there was an extra couple of dollars in the rates, that went to funding animal management, as the other departments are funded within council, if we looked at it as the same sort of importance?" I think it is, because, even if people don't own pets, they're impacted by them. I might have semi-owned cats that live on the property. What do I do with that? Where do I find those resources?

I think that, when we look at the spending in our report, we had that \$1.9 billion was spent on public order, safety and health; 2.1 was spent on recreational and cultural services; and \$2.3 billion was spent on environmental management, including waste management, yet \$34 million on animal management. It's a very important core service. It may need support from State Government, absolutely, to help the system get changed around. But I think that, long term, it could actually—with the budget that it has, that we can bump up, hopefully, a little bit, I can't see that it's going to need a hell of a lot more than what it already has.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Getting 2 Zero—how long has that organisation been going? What would I have learned if I had been able to go to the Big Hairy People and Pets summits and workshops?

NELL THOMPSON: So much. We would've loved to have had you there. But the presentations, the YouTube videos and the papers are all available free on the website. Everybody go there. But I think, to answer your question, Getting 2 Zero is a national program that was developed by the Animal Welfare League of Queensland. Their other national program is National Desexing Network, which you may have heard of. Lots of vets around Australia are hooked into that. I've been on board since 2013, but we developed the strategies and the program quite a few years before that. We've seen local councils around Australia implementing parts of what we suggest. Programs all over Australia, unfortunately, haven't been able to get the resources and get the support from management and other entities to implement everything that we recommend, but those programs that are in place are definitely yielding results and we're encouraging everybody to get the data as they go.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Thank you very much, Ms Thompson, for your attendance and for your very valued input to our consideration of this. I've asked witnesses earlier today about cost-of-living pressures and what we're seeing in terms of pets. I'm wondering what your experience might be.

NELL THOMPSON: Absolutely. Once again, we're going to talk about cats. If we have a cat that's turned up in the backyard—many families have kids. If we need to make the decision on what to do with that cat and how we get it to the vet, for a start—"I don't have a cat cage. I know nothing about cats"—then we find out it needs desexing and all rest of it. People coming up with that amount of money—and it's not a blight on the veterinary sector at all. Like I said, I've worked in it and I know how much things cost. It is an investment for someone to do that. If they're not financially in a place to do that, or mentally in a place to do that—cost-of-living pressures have a huge amount to do with how people keep their pets. We can see that when we look at the research that's been done, or even just have a look at the data that we do have that comes out of communities of lower socio-economic status and the rate of desexing of dogs and cats is extremely low. There's a reason for that. It is not that people do not want to do it; they just cannot afford to do it.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: In terms of animal relinquishment in this environment, what are you seeing on that?

NELL THOMPSON: Definitely surrenders have increased. There has been, reportedly—not a huge amount of data around it but anecdotally, we've got a bit of a boost in our unowned and semi-owned cat numbers, which is partially because we were not able to keep up with the desexing through COVID, because of the pressures that were put on clinics to close and reduce their activity. So we backslid there, then now we're coming into a period where people are experiencing financial pressure. What is the option to do? People don't have any other options at the moment, other than to surrender or to let their pet breed. Once again, if you talk to the people and if you have the opportunity to work on the ground—and there's quite a bit of evidence in Jacquie Rand's work

where they've done interviews with semi-owned cat owners. People want to do the right thing but do not have the capacity. The current cost-of-living pressures are definitely making an impact, and people need support.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: An earlier witness was talking about requests for food from a lot of the welfare support for the pets.

NELL THOMPSON: Absolutely.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: If it's the difference between feeding the kids and the pets—

NELL THOMPSON: Parents and families don't have a choice to make in that regard. They have to make that choice to support their human family first. Let's help them support the whole family because the pets are really important to these families.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: Just as background, the Hon. Emma Hurst, the Hon. Peter Primrose and I were on an inquiry yesterday looking at vet shortages. We went to Inverell and saw some of this for ourselves yesterday. Maybe if you could just elaborate in terms of your comments and experiences of this.

NELL THOMPSON: We are experiencing a significant vet shortage at the moment, but I think one area that we've missed is really taking advantage of the other skill set that we have in a veterinary clinic. Once again, I've been a vet nurse so I can speak to this. Legislation in other countries allows sufficiently skilled and trained lay staff, as we're called, to perform other procedures within a clinic, which definitely takes pressure off vets. As well as encouraging people to go into the vet stream and the vet sector, we also need to upskill the rest of the team so that they can help take the pressure off because they are absolutely capable.

The Hon. RACHEL MERTON: In terms of laypeople being able to assist to take some of the load off, would that be outside the vet clinic from your experience as a veterinary nurse?

NELL THOMPSON: Not necessarily. Sufficiently trained and skilled vet techs and vet nurses can do vaccination consults, microchipping, dental procedures and even male cat desexings. There's a whole range that they can do and a whole range of things that are done in other countries with sufficient training and support that we are not doing here. Vaccination is a big one because a lot of municipal and not-for-profit shelters don't necessarily have access to a vet clinic. Vets are integral to the operations and management of any facility so animals should be vaccinated on intake. That helps to relieve the pressure of disease—the health of the animals while they are in care. Currently, many places can't do that because they can't access a vet. A vet is not needed to do a vaccination. Lay staff can do it with sufficient training and registration—whatever needs to happen. The roll-on effects of the veterinary shortage impacts every animal that enters a shelter at every stage.

The CHAIR: We've talked a lot about cats throughout this inquiry, and I know that that's probably the more pressing issue and that's why cats keep coming up. But another issue we haven't spoken a lot about is the fact that a lot of dogs that end up in pounds belong to just a couple of breeds. I'm not suggesting any kind of breed-specific legislation, but what do we need to be doing then to deal with the fact that there are pounds that are getting breeds of dogs that are more difficult to adopt out? What do we need to do then in that space?

NELL THOMPSON: We could look at how, for example, San Francisco approached the issue. They had a very similar problem with the breeds that we experience but also with the Chihuahua type. They had an overpopulation of those as well. They looked at their data and looked at their intake and asked, "What are the dogs that are coming in? What strategies can we develop that will impact this intake rate?" Free desexing for those types of dogs—blanket—and it is still in place, as far as I know. Their intake dropped because, once again, if people have the opportunity—they might need help to get the animal to a vet or whatever the supportive strategy might be, but let's look at what the barriers are. Why are we getting all of these dogs that are of a similar type, and how can we prevent that? That might be something that we look at.

The CHAIR: I'm assuming that anybody that was looking against something like that would suggest that if we offer free desexing to certain breeds, it would encourage more breeding, or something, to have more of those animals sold. Is there any reality to that from San Francisco in the work they did?

NELL THOMPSON: No, there isn't. I think, once again, when we look at these things let's look at the evidence. I know sometimes our minds go to places. I've been in this industry a really long time and so I've been struck by new ideas, really often, throughout. If you speak to me in couple of years' time, I'll have more new things to say because it changes all the time. Initially when we hear things we're like, "Oh, that doesn't sound palatable at all." Adopting out cats for no charge. I remember hearing that one. I was like, "Oh, no, that is going to devalue the cat." Not at all. There's just no evidence. So let's look at the evidence rather than having that emotional response.

The CHAIR: Absolutely. I have one more question in regards to that whole idea of mandatory desexing. I note you also made an important clarification that there should be mandatory desexing for animals that are sold or adopted out, but not mandatory desexing for somebody that has an animal microchipped and registered in their name. We heard some really interesting evidence earlier today from the Cat Protection Society in regards to even changing the microchip and registration system so that semi-owned cats could be potentially microchipped and registered, say, to a corporation or an organisation rather than an individual, because they are more of a community cat rather than that person having 30 cats themselves. Is that another concern with an idea around mandatory desexing, that that would also stop somebody from being able to potentially microchip and register community cats?

NELL THOMPSON: Yes, absolutely. You did mention there mandatory desexing associated with registration and microchipping, but I don't think any form of mandatory desexing for the community is a good idea. There's just no evidence for it. Definitely organisations that are rehoming pets, so rescue groups, local government, not for profit—everyone should be desexing those animals before they go out. But we can't do that to the community, so we need to put in place other strategies, remove those barriers. And, yes, absolutely, if we want people to take on that semi-owned cat, what can we do to remove the barriers? I think community support programs are much more palatable to the community. None of us, when we're adults, likes to be told what to do, or that we're doing the wrong thing by our animal. We all know best. I know what's best for my pets; I am sure you do for yours. To be told by someone with a uniform, "You're doing the wrong thing"—it really doesn't create a good relationship and it doesn't get us very far. Whereas if we go offering things and offering a relationship-building experience, the whole relationship changes.

The CHAIR: I have just thought of one other question. You have spoken a bit about cat containment laws. In regards to those community cats or semi-owned cats, it would be really interesting to hear what would happen to those cats. Often they are left out of the argument that has been put forward by people promoting cat containment laws. Could we end up with hoarding situations where somebody is desperately trying to stop those cats from being killed and taking them in to, say, a small unit with, again, 30 cats? Or would we see, potentially, community cats who are actually being cared for by the community taken to the pound and potentially killed as well?

NELL THOMPSON: That's absolutely what is likely to happen, and what has been seen to happen in municipalities where that legislation—where we have the data, that intake has increased, and those animals aren't going back home again. So, once again, there's no evidence that it works. It's going to create a hell of a lot of friction. We absolutely understand the pressure that cats place on the environment. We absolutely acknowledge that. And one of the ways that we can see that we can reduce that pressure is when you desex cats, there is less roaming, there's less fighting, there's less need to—if they are connected to some kind of semi-owner, there is less need to go and find their own food. So it does actually reduce the environmental pressure whilst you're reducing that population. We have practised catch and kill for cats for 30 years now in Victoria and it hasn't got us anywhere. We can do it day in and day out and destroy our staff in the process, and destroy the relationship we have with the community in the process, but the evidence is not there that it gets us anywhere. Let's try a different approach that is clearly working in other places, and now in Australia.

The CHAIR: Absolutely. Thank you so much for coming in today and providing evidence. It is fantastic to hear about all of the amazing work that you are doing. I don't think any questions were taken on notice but, if they were, then the secretariat will be in contact. The Committee may have further questions, which the Committee secretariat will be in contact with as well.

NELL THOMPSON: We'd be very happy to answer them.

The CHAIR: Wonderful.

NELL THOMPSON: Thank you for your time.

(The witness withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Ms KARRI NADAZDY, Assistant to the President, and Horses and Livestock Representative, Animal Care Australia, affirmed and examined

Mrs KYLIE GILBERT, Dog Representative, Animal Care Australia, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

Mr GEOFF DAVIDSON, Individual, affirmed and examined

Ms ANNE-MARIE CURRY, Owner and Founder, Arthur & Co. Pet Detectives, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our next witnesses. Thank you for coming here to give evidence today. Do we have an opening statement from Animal Care Australia?

KARRI NADAZDY: Yes, we do.

The CHAIR: Good. We will start with you.

KARRI NADAZDY: Good afternoon. Chair, I ask that this statement be tabled, please.

The CHAIR: Yes.

KARRI NADAZDY: I am Karri Nadazdy, Assistant to the President of Animal Care Australia, and I am also the horse and livestock representative. Today I am joined by Kylie Gilbert, the Animal Care Australia Dog Representative. Animal Care Australia represents keepers and breeders of pets and companion animals nationally. Our goal is to promote and encourage high standards in all interactions with the animals in our care. Animal Care Australia recognises that pounds, shelters, rescues and rehoming organisations are all different but inextricably linked. With the introduction of the rehoming amendment bill in 2022, the link became more intricate than ever before.

What did not accompany that growing interaction are regulations that ensure the welfare of dogs and cats that find themselves traversing through the system. Equally missing is the same level of insistence that people who run or own rescues must be held accountable for their actions and the welfare of the dogs and cats in their care. It is astonishing that the Government currently holds councils and pounds, boarding facilities, dog and cat breeders to an expected level of welfare via codes of practice built into regulations and yet very few rescues are held equally responsible. Sure, POCTAA is there, but that requires a complaint and a full investigation. It is also questionable as to why there is an ongoing push for the full traceability of horses and greyhounds—and even dogs and cats—that leave a breeder's care, yet there remains a huge gap in the ability to trace dogs or cats that are moved from a pound and into a rescue.

We need to educate society on responsible buying and ownership of pets. After all, a large proportion of dogs and cats are in the pounds because of an irresponsible owner. They didn't research its needs, its behaviour, its potential size when grown up, and some owners have no patience or willingness to recognise their animal needs training or proper social interaction. Many pounds are inadequately funded. Even less have staff experienced in animal behaviour in order to correctly identify dogs that need retraining and cats that are exhibiting a natural response to being held captive rather than being labelled as feral.

Currently, councils are required to collect a stray animal and take it to their facility—potentially an hour or more away from where it is collected—instead of simply scanning a microchip and returning it immediately to its home, quite likely in the same neighbourhood. This process adds an extreme level of stress and anxiety on the animals and is expensive for councils. We're also here to support a review of the NSW Animal Welfare Code of Practice No 5—Dogs and cats in animal boarding establishments 1996 and for it to be expanded to include all rescues, whether they be private, not-for-profit or commercial. Animal care is animal welfare and, just like for homeless people in society, we need to do more to protect and assist our homeless animals. They deserve better. We would like to thank the Chair and the Committee for inviting us to appear today. We welcome your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Davidson, do you have an opening statement?

GEOFF DAVIDSON: Yes. If I could briefly introduce myself, I am here in a personal capacity. However, I have various roles within the rescue ecosystem, if you like. I'm a veteran rescuer. I'm co-founder of a rescue group. Over the last 15-plus years, we've had 700-plus animals through our home. So that's where I come into this. On top of that I'm also on the committee of a not-for-profit, another rescue group which operates a pound on behalf of a council, so I have experience from the pound end as well as the rescue. On top of that, and possibly the reason I'm here, I'm the collector of data.

The CHAIR: We've heard a lot about data today.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: We sure have.

GEOFF DAVIDSON: I'm the person who, for the past dozen or so years, has collected the raw data from the Office of Local Government by GIPAA every year, who collects RSPCA statistics and who compiles them into a form which I hope is accessible to the public and to university research. That's why I'm here. I distribute that via basically a Facebook page called Justice4Max, which is a front, almost, for a data project. It seeks to help public understanding of what rescue is and keeps things ticking over while I'm churning the statistics.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. Ms Curry?

ANNE-MARIE CURRY: Thank you, Madam Chair, and good afternoon to the honourable members of the Committee. Arthur & Co. Pet Detectives welcomes the inquiry into pounds in New South Wales and appreciates the opportunity to give evidence today. Arthur & Co. Pet Detectives was established in 2017 and is Australia's only comprehensive pet detective service, combining traditional methods of on-the-ground searching, traps, posters, flyers, along with innovative techniques such as geo-targeted social media advertising and the use of specialist investigators—some of whom are former police detectives—covert surveillance, online forensics and data mining, as well as technology such as thermal drones, covert trail cameras and remotely operated underground robots.

Since our inception we have worked on thousands of cases for missing and stolen companion animals such as dogs and cats, as well as horses, pet pigs, rescue goats, ferrets and birds. We have maintained an approximate 80 per cent success rate and have featured in over 100 positive media stories. Through our work, we are regularly required to engage with animal organisations across Australia, including animal rescues, microchip registries, councils and both public and privately operated pounds. Whilst many of these pounds do good work and are well run, given the nature of our work unfortunately we do encounter situations where this is not always the case.

Some of our investigations have uncovered wrongdoing, including a dog being marked as deceased by a council pound employee when it was known that the dog was alive and well, pet owners being told by pound staff or volunteers that the pet is not in the relevant pound when indeed the pet is, prohibitive increases in pound release fees that are unable to be justified or explained, and the funnelling of impounded pets off to rescue organisations before they have served their mandatory impound time or indeed been advertised as impounded. Whilst some of these situations might arise from genuine errors, many of the cases on which we have worked arise from a person in a position of trust and power deciding to play judge, jury and executioner as they believe they know what is best for that animal, even if it means breaking laws of which they must be aware by the very nature of their roles.

We have also encountered negative public perceptions of pounds, where a finder of a wandering, lost pet believes that taking the pet to a pound is an automatic death sentence, deterring the finder to either rely upon the local vets, which, as we heard from the president of the Australian Veterinary Association, New South Wales Division, places a strain on their resourcing—or resulting in the finder to keep the pet for themselves or rehome that pet through their own means. None of these are optimal outcomes for that pet.

One initiative that we've commenced to counter the occurrence of this theft by finding is to develop materials in a number of different languages so that the diverse range of members of our community are better able to understand and empowered regarding what they are required to do when they find a lost pet, including that taking that animal to a pound is one of the ways to help it be reunited with its owner. We have engaged accredited translators and will soon be looking to distribute these materials throughout the community, local vets and online.

Whilst the inquiry has heard from many other organisations of the issues arising from abandonment of pets and the impounding of genuine strays, Arthur and Co Pet Detectives brings a perspective from that of the many owners that we represent, who are genuinely searching for their missing pets and are very keen to be reunited with them as soon as possible. Accordingly, therefore, our submission focuses on some practical recommendations as to how to better reunite pets with their owners, which will inevitably take some of the strain off the pound system—recommendations such as repeat microchip scanning and registry searching for impounded pets; multi-database and multi-jurisdictional microchip scanning; ensuring that impounding fees, release fees, are structured so as to encourage responsible pet ownership; and ensuring that our companion animal laws are actually enforced, particularly those in relation to the finding of lost pets, their pathway through the pound system and their reunification.

We believe that, if these practical measures are adopted, this will lead to more pets being reunited with their genuine legal owners sooner and will enhance the reputation of pounds, meaning that more found animals will be handled in accordance with the legal requirements designed to protect them and to reunite them with their genuine legal owners. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I might start with some questions to Mr Davidson. We've heard a lot today about data, and a lot of advocates in this space were just saying that we need so much more data to be able to understand what priorities need to be made, to reduce the number of animals ending up in the pound system and to reduce the

number of euthanasias for the animals that do end up in the pound system. You've been collecting and analysing pound data for over a decade now. What are the problems and the gaps in the way New South Wales is collecting and publishing pound data? What is the data that we need to start collecting and distributing?

GEOFF DAVIDSON: The data that's collected from the pounds themselves, where accurate—and I'll get onto that in a second—is actually pretty good. It's very granular. I can look at it and see what every pound is doing. I get the raw data from Office of Local Government, not the stuff they publish, which is very abridged. The stuff I have there can look at what the numbers that come into every pound are for every month going back for 12 years. I can't trace the animal, because it is just data, so I can't tell if the same 20 that came in are the same 15 that went out, but I can tell that I can also see where it's been dodged up, and that happens a lot. I can see that there's pounds that, allegedly, have zero animals in them at the end of every month, which means that they've got their data and they've reverse-engineered it. Alternatively, there's others that reckon they have peak numbers of 100 and something dogs when it's a pound that fits eight. Again, that's dodgy.

The dataset itself is quite good—again, the full dataset. And it can tell you, at least on an overall basis—and what isn't published by Office of Local Government was quite handy to the rehoming review last year, when I provided it—what's happening pre-impound. It tells you how many are stray, how many are seized and also how many are returned to owner, and there's quite a large number returned to owner before they're ever impounded. For the 2021 year, I think it was 4,518 out of, probably, about 25,000. So only about 20,000 hit the pound, because 4,500—this was dogs—were returned to owner before they ever hit the pound. That sort of thing could be improved.

Where I find difficulty in terms of this is the data collected from the rescues is also quite granular, but it's slightly different data from the pound, so they don't mesh particularly well. The data collected, such as it is, from the major shelter organisations is awful. And so it doesn't mesh at all. So there's no ability to look at those pathways and exactly how the flows work, because the three sets of data that are collected are different, and they can't be meshed in any way. That's something I would like to see fixed.

The CHAIR: Standardised reporting?

GEOFF DAVIDSON: Yes, more standardised reporting and certainly more detail from the major shelter organisations, who seem to get a free pass on what data they did. I'll be frank: RSPCA NSW's annual report came out a couple of days ago, and it was bereft of any real information. There might be some useful information once RSPCA Australia publishes the information, probably around February, March. There's data there. It just needs to be made in a way which could be—

The CHAIR: Transparent, analysed.

GEOFF DAVIDSON: Yes.

The CHAIR: You hinted about the accuracy of the data. Do we need some kind of auditing and oversight of the statistics as they're collected?

GEOFF DAVIDSON: Definitely. One thing I was going to probably mention later but I can mention now, for example, when it came to cats—quite some years ago now, there was a Federal Government department which praised a regional council in New South Wales for its disposal of feral cats and mentioned some numbers. But, when you looked at the data, I can see that what the pound did was—every single one of the 585 cats that came into that pound in that year was marked as feral and killed. I think that's statistically unlikely, and it wasn't in line with the years before or after. So I think just a bit of overview, looking for the stuff that's clearly outliers and the fact that the councils know, if the councils knew that this data's been looked at that, whereas—the only person that ever looks at this data is me. And, unfortunately, they're not sufficiently scared of me to take notice of that. Certainly, from the Office of Local Government view, there needs to be someone looking, at least on an overview, to go, "This doesn't look right."

The CHAIR: You also mentioned in your submission that most councils don't even report how much money they're actually spending on the pound. It was interesting. We've heard from a lot of councils saying that they don't have funding or there's no money that they can give to the council pounds, but then we heard from the Office of Local Government this morning, saying they're just not prioritising the pounds and they're putting the money into other priorities, but the money is supposedly there somewhere. Does it need to be mandatory reporting around the finances that they're putting into the pounds? If so, why?

GEOFF DAVIDSON: Yes. I think, in my attempts to look at what councils are spending on this and therefore trying to work out whether ratepayers are getting bang for their buck and the community is getting bang for their buck, it's almost impossible for me to work out—and I'm quite familiar with a set of accounts—what they're actually spending on accounts, because the spend is included in "miscellaneous services" or wherever it's

put. It can't be split out. Victoria does have the Know Your Council system, which is quite deficient in many ways. It at least makes an attempt to have councils say what they're spending on animal welfare. It's not at all clear to me what's included in that category or whether it's standardised or whether they can still make stuff up, but it's a start. So I think that there are many things that are needed from the council and, probably, animal management plans and the like. But I think somewhere in that there should be some standardised accountability for ratepayers to be able to see what's being spent and, hopefully, with enough granularity to work out how it's being spent.

The CHAIR: I have one more question just for Mr Davidson. The pet register is being updated, but I believe that rescue groups are going to be one of the last tranche that gets access to that or are brought into it, whereas the trials and the consulting at the moment is with other groups. Today we've talked about this real problem with transferring an animal, and it being a paper form that has to physically go to the council. The council might sit on it, we're hearing. I think we heard a case today where for two years, or something like that, the animal wasn't transferred over. And then, also, a lot of rescue groups are saying, "Well, then legally we're accountable for that animal if they get hit by a car or something else happens", because that paperwork is just sitting in this bizarre pile. Will the Pet Registry help with that? And, if it does, should we really be prioritising rescue groups as well in these early stages—so that we can have, say, breeders and rescue groups in this early tranche of the pet register, so we can overcome some of these issues?

GEOFF DAVIDSON: Yes, certainly. One of the points I've raised in previous reviews is the difficulty there. Some of it is just structural. I mean, the breeder is going to have a breeder registration number because they're a person. A rescue group is an entity, and therefore you can't get through the front door of the way that these things are structured. The difficulties we have are both on the intake end and the outtake end. If an animal is coming into rescue from the council, most of the time that's relatively well handled—not all the time, but it's reasonably well handled. Maybe 50 per cent, though, of animals that come into rescue are surrenders which haven't come in through the pound, and the objective there for the rescue group is to stop them having to place a burden on the pound. So about half of the animals are coming out of pounds. Half of them are hopefully being diverted from ever having to go there. Those ones are really difficult for us from a veracity point of view because we have someone that says they're the owner. They are surrendering an animal to us. We can ask for maybe some copies of a vet bill. We can ask for certain things, but we don't have access to any data to verify.

We look at the Companion Animals Act and it's not just there are several categories of owner, in terms of—sorry, yes, that's the Companion Animals Act, not POCTAA. So there are several ways that you might be an owner or considered an owner, but we have no way of checking what's often considered the primary one, which is the registration details and the chip. That flows into that outtake end as well. You said the stupidity of having paper forms sitting on someone's desk. The ones that are more likely to do that are the ones where there's a mismatch between the information that we've had on the way in—so we've had someone sign a C3A form, a surrender form, into us. They're not the same as the chipped owner. If they're not the same as the chipped owner, then we have a problem because it might be weeks, months-plus, before we find out that that is actually the case, because it's not a question necessarily of being able to stand at the counter and have someone process them there, and say, "Thanks for that. I'll put them in my pile and I'll get to you later." But if there's a mismatch, we're not necessarily told in any reasonable period of time. And then, on the way out—

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt. What does that mean for the animal? Does that mean that you have to then hold the animal for several months before you can rehome them?

GEOFF DAVIDSON: It might, if we're aware of it. If we're not aware of it, it's potentially that it's gone to a new home, with us acting in good faith and doing the paperwork and that, and sometimes it's only on the way out, when we are trying to get that processed, that someone has said, "Hang on, but it's not in your name." We go, "But three months ago we put the paperwork in." "Oh, here it is at the bottom of someone's in pile." So to be able to check—we don't need all the details, but at least to have enough that we can be sure that it's coming from the chipped owner. If I put my pound hat on for a moment, the number of animals that are still chipped to breeder is an absolute disgrace. You know, there was a 12-year-old dog a couple of days ago, and fortunately its owner was found, but it was still chipped to the breeder at Mudgee. We're seeing that all the time. Going back to the rescue bit, if we have a dog that comes in and it's lived with someone for 12 years—they are the owner—if we go to try to put that paperwork in, it gets blocked and we don't even know it's blocked. Yes, if we're able to address those issues, on the way in and the way out, it will smooth things greatly.

KARRI NADAZDY: Could I add to that? I agree with what Geoff is saying here. We are finding the same problems from breeders as well, where they've rehomed the animal. You don't have to hold the animal. You can rehome it because you've done your paperwork. You have done your job. You've handed them the paperwork. You have to have three copies, so you have yours, the council's and the new owner's. You've done your job. It's then the council's end to follow up and the owner to actually register that paperwork. They need to actually do that. What would solve that problem is real-time reporting rather than paper forms, which seems to be the obvious

thing we have been hearing today. The other thing is who should have access to that information. From ACA's point of view, we feel that that should only be councils and pounds—that it should be certain authorised persons, and it shouldn't be open to anyone.

One of the things with the rescue groups, which we have put in a fair bit of detail in our submission, is that rescues—the whole industry is unregulated. There is no reporting. There is no accountability. There is no tracking. There are not even criminal checks on who runs a rescue—that they can actually do so or should be working with animals—whereas we have these checks for even people working with animals now. There's a really big gap in the system that needs to be plugged with regulation on the rescues and the rehoming organisations before we can bring them into this industry. We have a pound industry, a shelter industry, rescues and rehoming. At the moment, the pounds and shelters are regulated, and then, when the animals are transferred into rescues, they disappear. They're gone. And unless the rescue does the right thing, and the new owner does the right thing—and, as Geoff said, the paperwork trail does not keep up with what's happening with that animal. I will come back to that. What it means is that animals disappear into the system and, as Geoff said, we have no way of checking that they're actually coming back out of that system. So they disappear into rescue and they're gone.

There are approved rehoming organisations with the OLG that are registered. Those rescues—basically that gives them an exemption from desexing their animals and registering the microchips. That rehoming authorisation that they get has nothing to do with welfare. There are no premises checks. There are no reporting checks. There's no—they do lodge a form once a year, and that is it. But there is no actual inspection of premises. There are no criminal checks. There are no background checks. There are no checks on who is volunteering. There is no microchip list. They report numbers of animals in and numbers of animals out—there is no traceability of the individual animals. That is missing, so we can't identify an animal that goes into the system multiple times and flag it as one that needs special care and special attention, or that there is a problem with the rescue. These are holes in the system that need to be plugged before we can really address the issues that Geoff is raising.

GEOFF DAVIDSON: If I could say, I will need to disagree somewhat on the accountability side, particularly in relation to the approved rehoming. It's not frequent but certainly every year, yes, we have to put in more data than the RSPCA has to, for example. But, secondly, I don't know that there are checks. Certainly we have to provide declarations that our people have not been—I don't know about general criminal, but certainly no-one's charged with anything with POCTAA. We do have to provide lists of foster carers. There are no premises checks—agreed. But certainly there is more accountability than I think you might believe. On renewal of 17 (c) forms, which is only every few years, certainly at that point, no, there are definitely microchip checks. Definitely—in great detail. Unfortunately, I think a lot of the data is kept by address, rather than things that your own dogs do tend to get mixed up with the rescue dog data. So it's not perfect but, yes, we definitely get asked about why has this dog not got out or whatever. The 17 (c) exemption is from paying registration fees.

The CHAIR: So it's not an exemption from desexing?

GEOFF DAVIDSON: It's not an exemption from desexing; it's an exemption from paying registration fees for up to a year for dogs in your care. We're obliged within two weeks, which coincides with our two-week trial, typically speaking—industry standard—to have put the paperwork in. It could take six months for it to be actually done, but we're obliged to have put that in in two weeks.

KARRI NADAZDY: And also the approved rehoming organisations are only for dog and cat rescues, so horse rescues are not eligible. You can't have any rabbit rescues. None of the other animals are eligible to even apply for this rehoming.

GEOFF DAVIDSON: I believe that is probably because the exemption—the one thing we get is the registration. If horses don't have a registration fee then I guess they're not picked up in that system.

The CHAIR: I think it's probably also because, in the Companion Animals Act, a companion animal is defined as a cat or a dog—or a dingo, oddly, but just those three species. Ms Curry, I want to jump to a very different topic before I throw to others. In your submission you talk a lot about how fines and fees coming from pounds can actually prevent recovering and reuniting people with their animals, and particularly vulnerable members of the community. I want to hear a bit more about what recommendations you would like to see from the report from this Committee and what we can be doing to really make sure that those animals are coming out of pounds and going back to people who are on lower incomes, rather than keeping an animal in a pound and separating those families and then potentially euthanising healthy animals. How do we fix that problem as a community? What recommendations should we be making in that space?

ANNE-MARIE CURRY: I think the data point is quite important—where pounds are sufficiently resourced to enable them to look at the occasions of impounding for a particular animal. For example, we did a case recently where a member of our homeless community and a victim of Australia's housing crisis was

needlessly separated from her beloved poodle of 12 years. Without the assistance of our supporters and our organisation, the fees were prohibitive. That dog had never been impounded before and wasn't even in a situation where it needed to be impounded. It was picked up by a well-meaning member of the community near its tent in a park in the inner west.

The fees went from \$275, which was already prohibitive to her, in the space of an hour to over \$1,000. When we interacted with that particular pound, the pound was really unable to, in a transparent and justifiable way, explain the increase in those fees. I think that it's very important for otherwise responsible owners whose pet goes missing due to an occasion of misadventure or mistake, such as a tradesman leaving a window open or a lawnmowing man leaving a gate open or whatever the case may be, that they are not needlessly dislocated from their animals due to prohibitive pound fees. A way that that can be assessed is really looking at the data. How old is this animal? How many times has it been impounded before? How can we also put in place a hardship application process that enables people to either enter into payment plans or have concessions for the otherwise payable fees?

KYLIE GILBERT: I think Nell Thompson made a really good point in the last sitting around the fact that we want to try to avoid the animals getting to the shelters and pounds in the first place, and making sure that they can be reunited with their owners—so probably a stronger microchip database. Currently, Australia wide, I think there are six databases that don't all link up. If we could have one database that had all microchips on it, and go the next step as well: that the breeders are attached to those animals at all times. Because a lot of the time if an animal gets out, the microchip may not have been updated or is still in the breeder's name. Those breeders know, or should know, who they've sold those animals to.

But if we can go as far as possible to reunite animals before they have to be incarcerated into a pound and wait the seven days, it's far better for the animals themselves from a welfare point of view, both physical and mental, and also for the owners themselves. I do think we seriously have to look at the fact that it's not a first offence. You get a \$500 fine and you have to try to get those funds together to get your animal out. Things happen. Fireworks happen; doors fly open. We really need to look at, if there has to be a charge, a scale of charges. It really is a bit of a revenue recoup for some of these organisations, especially councils, to get some money back—because, at the end of the day, most of that money goes back to the councils in fines, not to the shelters and pounds to pay for the services they provide.

ANNE-MARIE CURRY: If I could just add to that, I think the repeated microchip scanning—we have a significant amount of data that shows that at the time that an animal escapes its yard or goes missing, at least 50 per cent and possibly as high as 70 per cent of the time, there are some microchip data issues. Either it's microchipped in another State and the NSW Pet Registry does not recognise that microchip, or it's not registered on the NSW Pet Registry. As you would know, they don't talk to each other. If a dog has moved from Queensland to New South Wales and it isn't on the NSW Pet Registry, there is no way—unless the pounds have multi-jurisdictional access to all of the databases, which often come with subscription and access fees. At least 50 per cent to 70 per cent of the time, when a pet goes missing, either the microchip details are out of date or with a former owner or the breeder, or they're microchipped in another jurisdiction in New South Wales.

That repeated scanning—a microchipped pet is mandatorily required to be held for 14 days. But often the pounds only scan on day one, and then it's up to the owner to somehow find their way to that pet, to the pound, or wait for several days until someone has the time and the resources to advertise that pet as being in the pound—and for the pound data and staff to actually know that the pet is in the pound when the owner calls. So there are some delays which are directly linked to the rates and fees that aren't necessarily all on the owners' shoulders. That repeated microchip scanning—they will often update their microchip, so perhaps by day three or day seven, if it's repeated and rescanned and looked up, then the microchip details will be up to date.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Can I just follow up? You both might answer. Part of your submission, Karri, was about data linking and collaboration being included in the redevelopment of the Pet Registry. I liked what you said about real time, and we've heard from other people today about when they do scan and it's still in the breeder's name or they've changed the address. I understand why they can't change it, but is there a way that they could perhaps put a case note in there to say that the dog or the cat was at this facility between these days, and things like that? I'd like to know what you would like to see in the redevelopment of the Pet Registry and whether it would help in detecting or tracing animals when they are lost.

KARRI NADAZDY: One of the things we've been doing with the horse industry is looking at a national horse traceability register, so there's been a lot of talk about how do we identify horses. At the moment there's a PIC number scheme, which is basically the standard in the agricultural industry, as you would know. Horses are reported on the PIC number, but it's not individual animals. It's similar to our pound reporting, where it's just in and out. Everybody's doing that every year. That could be something that could be incorporated into the

Pet Registry, where DPI could actually be sending you a reminder every year. Even though we can lodge those online, I still get a letter every year in the mail saying, "You need to lodge your PIC."

The other part of that in the horse traceability is whether microchips are the best way to trace animals. In dogs and cats it probably is, and microchips are ideal for them. But remember, pounds don't just deal with dogs and cats. They deal with livestock, they deal with horses and they deal with some small animals as well—especially country pounds, where they're dealing with stray livestock on roads and things—so they have different identification methods. We can't get stuck on just microchips.

The other problem with large animals like horses is that microchips don't live as long as the horses do. I've got a horse that is 27 years old. He is on his third microchip because the chip does not last as long as does. I got him chipped when he was five months old. I've got a cat that's on her second one because it just stopped working. We don't check our microchips. If I didn't know my cat's chip didn't work, I wouldn't ask my vet to check. We need to get our vets, on their annual check-up, to actually check the microchip works.

That would really help, and then at least the system can be updated. Then you have your vet recording into this real-time register, "This chip does not work. We've put a new one in", or "We're going to put a new one in on this date". My vet, when it stopped working, we said, "Okay, let's wait six months and see if it's migrated"—because it can move through muscles and tendons. They said, "Let's wait six months and see if it turns up on the other side." It didn't turn up, so we put a new chip in. In those six months my animal is not chipped, as well.

This is where those real-time registers would be helpful, but that real-time register should be one way. We should be able to enter the data in, but it should be checked at the other end so it's still dependent on someone in authority checking those things. You have to do that. You can't leave it open—like I said, the rehoming industry is largely unregulated. We can't have just anybody entering data and changing these details. It really needs to be councils and pounds, possibly vets—even we can't agree whether vets should have access to that or not.

KYLIE GILBERT: Karri, sorry, I will just add to that. I'm in Victoria, so we have all sorts of different systems. But as someone who owns dogs and breeds dogs, I have the ability on our register to go into a login that's my login and update if I sell a dog, if I rehome it—anything that I do with it—I can do it and then I can continuously check to make sure it's done. It helps when it's not a paper trail. You've got the ability to have a portal that the shelters could be logging in and, once a week, double-checking that these microchip numbers are being moved around, that they're not on their system anymore and whose system are they now on. Is there any other way to trace dogs and cats? Probably not; this is the best one. But it's all going to come down to the system, at the end, and getting away from that paper trail.

KARRI NADAZDY: The other thing they are looking at with the horse traceability register is doing it through Service NSW and the equivalents to make it national, as well, and yet it's the States that are managing all these things. This has actually been quite difficult, and we have the exact same problems with the Pet Registry. Really, these systems need to be national. We hear a lot of rescue groups are rescuing from interstate. These systems need to talk to each other. That's really important. We need that whole-of-life tracking and a way to do that easily. Sending off mail and waiting for mail doesn't work.

The CHAIR: Does the Government have questions?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I think we are just about up, aren't we?

The CHAIR: We are. I don't know if the witnesses are happy to stay for a couple more minutes if the Government has questions?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: My question was really to Ms Gilbert about—and I think she has kind of answered it—the issues surrounding what you call the unregulated, unmonitored pet rehoming sector. Did you want to elaborate on some of the problems with that?

KYLIE GILBERT: I think the issues arise from, as Karri stated before, the fact that larger shelters and pounds sort of fall under this—they've got rules and regulations around what they've got to do. They're probably a lot more monitored, but anyone can start up a rescue. You can go and apply for an ABN and become a rescue. In New South Wales I believe there are some checks; it is different to Victoria, so I'm probably not as over it as Karri is. But we know from history with small rescue groups that a lot of people take on this job because they want to see every animal out of the pound and shelter system. They want to try to do their best to rehome them. They go into it with the best intentions, but there are no checks and balances on them. Is there a limit to how many dogs people can realistically take in and properly rehome? A lot of dogs that end up in shelters and pounds need real behaviour modification. They need retraining; they need nutritional changes—all of these sorts of things that the smaller rescues probably don't have the background to do. But they're doing it for the best reasons.

We feel that there have to be some checks and balances on these smaller rescues—whether that is, as Karri said in our submission, that they fall under the same sort of guidelines as the boarding code of practice so that they do have some checks, they have guidelines and they have minimum standards and that's what they have to be able to run a proper service. We've spoken to some pounds that people have told us have been full and we speak to them and they say, "No, we're not really. We don't know where people are getting these numbers from." But we speak to smaller rescues and they're all saying, "We've got a million cats. We've got so many dogs. We need homes. We need foster carers. We can't take any more in because our foster carers are full." How are these people being monitored?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: What about this suggestion of an apprenticeship model for animal handlers employed by councils?

KYLIE GILBERT: Again, it's an education thing. With councils, their AMOs get education usually on the job. But there probably needs to be more education around—if you have a look on the websites of most shelters and pounds and look at some of the breeds, who is identifying these breeds? People are ringing up a pound and going, "I'm looking for my Shih tzu" and they go, "I'm sorry, we don't have any Shih tzus" because someone has gone, "Oh, that's something else"—a cavoodle or something along those lines. In order to better rehome more animals, there needs to be education around identifying breeds, behaviours and all of these sorts of things that are probably going to put a little bit more surety behind it. We're going to know what animals are able to be rehomed rather than putting animals out into small rescues that may not really be rehomed. There is such a thing that not all animals—some of them are too far gone, unfortunately, and we see a lot of it. But it is just making sure that they're able to do from A to Z as part of their job and not fumbling their way through, which may see some animals slip through the cracks.

GEOFF DAVIDSON: Could I add to that a little? First of all, breed identification is difficult for anyone, especially when you're talking crossbreeds. Yes, certainly one small white fluffy looks a bit the same to me because I'm used to bigger dogs and working dogs. I take the point that you could easily say "We don't have any Shih tzus" because you don't quite know which one they are. There are rescues that, as they said, go into it for the right reasons and get overwhelmed. I will say that at the moment the entire rescue thing is overwhelmed a bit. What we're turning away on a daily basis is terrible: breeds that allegedly don't come into pounds or don't come into rescue, whether they're cavoodles, dachshunds—there are so many dachshunds in rescue at the moment. All these popular breeds, as they get more popular, likewise they turn up in rescue. It's not just staffies and cattle dogs. It's across the gamut of all of these.

With a pound operator hat on, there's a couple of points. One is that fees are set by council and by a pound operator, but quite often where fees get prohibitive it's because the animal is not registered, or it's desexed and not registered. What makes the fee jump from a small—it's still difficult for a homeless person, but what turns it into a big fee is that it was not registered and not desexed in the first place. I think desexing is a big, big part of that. On the rescue group front, certainly we would say that we do have a layer of regulation. Whether it's the right regulation and whether it's efficient, I will leave that for the Committee to make decisions on. But some of us, at least, are pretty much there. On the pound thing, at the pound that we're at, I think the majority of our people will have some sort of certificate in animal—they're not just people straight off the street.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Where's that certification administered?

GEOFF DAVIDSON: It's a TAFE course.

The CHAIR: Can I clarify something? We're hearing things that are quite different in this session compared with what we've heard. The Office of Local Government has said that there are no standards for pounds; that the only thing they could ever get them under is POCTAA, which would be the same for rescue groups; that there are no regular audits of pounds or shelters; and that the boarding code technically doesn't apply to pounds. It sounds to me that, whether you're talking about rescue groups, shelters or pounds, it's all the same—that POCTAA applies to all of them.

GEOFF DAVIDSON: I'd say that, and possibly including the breeders—is more or less unregulated. I don't see that there's any great regulation on any part of it. Certainly we see things in pounds, for example. We hear of things in rescue. We certainly see things in breeding as well. So I don't think any part of that ecosystem is immune from that. And the regulation is, other than POCTAA, which requires a higher level of something going wrong and is poorly administered—yes, I think the whole sector is—

The CHAIR: The whole system is not regulated.

KARRI NADAZDY: Can I add to that? That was Kim Filmer this morning. I rewound that and listened to it three times, because I was as confused as you. What I understood her to say was that the boarding—sorry, I have it here.

The CHAIR: The code said that pounds were included, but POCTAA then excluded them.

KARRI NADAZDY: But POCTAA excludes where they exchange for payment.

The CHAIR: No, it wasn't quite that. It was something much more specific. It was something about it needing to be for fee—for reward. That's where it technically excludes some—

KARRI NADAZDY: Yes, but it's still under those boarding regulations. And what she was saying straight after that was that if they're smart they'd be following those regulations and that they are up to that, and it would take a legal challenge to sort out whether they're actually under that or not. So if we assume that they are under those regulations, they do have some sort of regulatory body, but they're also accountable to their councils. There's someone that they are accountable to and they have to report to their councils. So they're under another body. It is the same with the breeders. We now have the breeding codes. We have codes of practice as well for most animal species that we already have. The industry is already fairly regulated, and it's kind of self-monitoring because all of these groups are under some sort of other body that they report to, with the exception of rescues. And shelters are even—

The CHAIR: I'm assuming, Mr Davidson, you would argue—this is only referring to rescues that are registered. Because they're approved by councils, aren't they?

GEOFF DAVIDSON: Yes. I think there is certainly that. Not all rescues have to have a 17 (c), as it's called. The ones that have have some layer of regulation. We'd say that pounds essentially have. They are under a council. Most councils couldn't care less. Many of them I think consider it an adjunct to their waste management sections. So, yes, they're under a council but there's high variability within the pounds sector and within the councils. What we normally find is a pound will improve its standards when someone dedicated comes in, and they will slide again when that person gets moved out and leaves. It's the same within shelter organisations. There's too much which is dependent on the individuals that come into this.

One thing that Karri mentioned earlier was the rule that said that pounds have to offer animals to rescues. I think, unfortunately, the timing on that was terrible. It came at a time when rescues are just overwhelmed. Statistically and traditionally, rescues rehome—just the 17 (c)s. On dogs, they rehome about as many as all the pounds plus RSPCA combined. They are the traditional sorts of numbers. Without them, the system fails essentially. So, yes, I think we have to be held to some standard. I don't have a problem with that. But there's still too much on the individuals. I think that was a brave attempt—an attempt to say there should be some standards in pounds when seeking to rehome animals—and I agree there need to be some standards there to take away that variability that is reliant on a person.

ANNE-MARIE CURRY: Can I just circle back to the Hon. Aileen MacDonald's question that I didn't get to answer before, which was regarding the Pet Registry and the data? The OLG has the ability and access to audit every microchip, and that will show every occasion of anyone looking up that microchip on any access point, ever. The ability to get that data from the OLG is very, very difficult. So easier access to that data—it's often very delayed and it often requires payment of fees and several requests to get the data, but there is an absolute audit trail for every microchip on every animal and who has looked it up. If I could touch on your point about the pound fees being higher when they're not desexed, I take that point. But then we see these dogs and cats going for \$60 to the first person who walks in the door willing to adopt them. That's not necessarily a desirable outcome for that pet, who could otherwise have been reunited with its long-term, loving, responsible owner versus being put up for adoption and going to the person who's the first through the door.

I know we're over time, but could I just end with this: There has been a lot of talk about good intentions today and that's all well and good. But good intentions can't be measured, and there's no way to hold people accountable for that. So I think that independent compliance officers doing spot checks on any entity, but indeed pounds, to ensure that all levels of the recommendations that come out of this are looked at—who looked up the microchip? How many times was it looked up? Who was contacted? What is the condition this pet was found in? If they're independent measures put in place and non-related third parties responsible for ensuring that they're complied with, then we would probably see a marked increase in outcomes.

The CHAIR: I am going to have to wrap it up there. We've gone quite over time now, but I do appreciate you giving us your time, and I also appreciate the Committee staying back. There may be further questions on notice. This was quite a robust conversation. The Committee will be in contact about those questions. I don't think anyone took any questions on notice but, if they did, the Committee will be in contact about that as well. Thank you all for joining us here today, and thank you all for all the evidence that you've provided to us.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 17:15.