

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

ANIMAL WELFARE COMMITTEE

**INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN
NEW SOUTH WALES**

CORRECTED

At Macquarie Room, Parliament House, Sydney, on Monday 16 December 2024

The Committee met at 9:30.

PRESENT

The Hon. Emma Hurst (Chair)

Ms Abigail Boyd

Ms Sue Higginson

The Hon. Aileen MacDonald

The Hon. Bob Nanva (Deputy Chair)

The Hon. Peter Primrose

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

The Hon. Wes Fang

The Hon. Stephen Lawrence

The Hon. Emily Suvaal

The CHAIR: Welcome to the first hearing of the Animal Welfare Committee inquiry into the management of cat populations 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 today.

My name is Emma Hurst, and I am the Chair of the Committee. I ask everyone in the room to 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.

Professor SARAH LEGGE, Professor, Charles Darwin University; Honorary Professor, Australian National University; Principal Research Fellow, University of Queensland; member, Invasive Species Council Conservation and Science Committee; and member, Australian Government Threatened Species Scientific Committee, affirmed and examined

Mr JACK GOUGH, Advocacy Director, Invasive Species Council, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome, and thank you for making the time to give evidence today. Would either of you like to make a short opening statement?

JACK GOUGH: Thank you so much for the opportunity to give evidence at this important inquiry. Thanks, in particular, to Minister Hoenig and Minister Sharpe, who made an election commitment that such an inquiry would take place, and for following through on that commitment. The Invasive Species Council is an independent not-for-profit environmental organisation. We advocate for stronger laws, policies and programs to keep Australia's incredible biodiversity safe from weeds, feral animals, diseases and other invaders. Cats are incredible animals, and they are loved as pets by millions of households in Australia. Unfortunately for our wildlife, they are also extremely effective hunters and killers of small mammals, birds, frogs, lizards and insects. Predation by cats is a key threatening process for endangered wildlife under both New South Wales and Commonwealth environment law. Cats have, unfortunately, contributed to at least 20 native Australian mammals going extinct and are an identified threat to over 200 nationally listed threatened species.

Professor Sarah Legge, a member of our Conservation and Science Committee, will speak in detail to the research on the enormous impact of cats, but the headline numbers are staggering. The average roaming and hunting pet cat kills 110 native animals per year, meaning that if 70 per cent of pet cat owners in Greater Sydney alone allow their cat to roam, we are talking about a quarter of a billion native animals killed in Greater Sydney by roaming pet cats in this term of Parliament. We cannot change the nature of cats, but we can change the culture which allows our pet cats to roam, hunt, harass and kill native animals. There is no single intervention that is going to enable that cultural shift, but fundamentally it requires clear rules and expectations that cat owners keep their pets contained to their property, clear identification of pets and their ownership, funding for education and compliance, and wide uptake of desexing by four months of age.

Currently, New South Wales and Western Australia are the only States that do not allow councils to introduce cat containment or curfew requirements. We know that those interventions have wide public support and will also be a win for cat welfare, with cats kept safe at home avoiding injury and premature death due to car strikes, accidents, fights and disease. For cat containment rules, there are two different pathways that we think the Government could go down: one of them is introducing statewide rules, and the other is looking at allowing and encouraging councils to introduce their own requirements. We recommend the latter, which is councils being empowered. I am happy to talk about that in more detail. We believe that it will allow the level of community engagement and buy-in required to actually get cultural shift on this, rather than it being a statewide imposition.

Our key recommendation is that New South Wales looks across the border to what Victoria is doing. There is a lot of uptake by councils and a shift on this because of the way that their legislation is structured. The five things that we would really like to see this Committee recommending to the New South Wales Government are to amend the New South Wales Companion Animals Act to enable local governments to enforce anti-roaming laws for pet cats at a local level; to require local governments to develop companion management plans and review them regularly; to allocate funding to support compliance, education, desexing, identification and registration programs, including extending the funding for RSPCA's Keeping Cats Safe at Home program, which runs out in 2024; to make desexing mandatory statewide by four months of age; and to develop and resource a statewide cat management strategy. I will hand over to Professor Legge.

SARAH LEGGE: I will add a bit more about myself and my work. As I mentioned, I'm a professor of wildlife conservation. I served on the Commonwealth's Threatened Species Scientific Committee for 11 years, until late last year, as the deputy chair. I have carried out research on cats on and off for most of my professional life. With colleagues, we carried out much of the fundamental research that you will see referred to across many of the submissions to this inquiry. For example, we established the population size of feral cats. We established the predation toll of both feral and pet cats. We identified which native species are most heavily affected by cat predation and carried out field research to fine-tune management options to reduce the impacts of cats. We've also estimated the economic cost of diseases to livestock and people where the pathogens depend on cats for transmission.

Myself and a colleague, Professor John Woinarski, drafted the new threat abatement plan for cats. This is the national threat abatement plan. This is the first threat abatement plan to be made jointly by State, Territory

and Commonwealth Ministers—except for Queensland—under national environmental law. That reflects the shared recognition of the severity of the threat that cats pose to our native fauna.

The terms of reference mostly focus on pet cats and their management, so I will say a bit more about that. There are more pet cats than feral cats in Australia. There are over five million pet cats; there are fewer than three million feral cats. Although pet cats are fed, most of them still hunt. When they do, only about 15 per cent of what they kill is brought home, so many owners are unaware of what their cat is up to. Each pet cat hunts at about a quarter of the rate of a feral cat. We've estimated that each pet cat kills an average of 110 native animals a year.

Whereas the average density of feral cats in the bush is 0.2 per square kilometre—so, much less than one—the density of roaming pet cats is over 40 per square kilometre. That means that the predation toll per square kilometre is much higher where pet cats are roaming. Many Australian pet cat owners already keep their cats contained. The figure is usually between 30 and 50 per cent, depending on where you are, so containment is neither a novel nor a radical idea. I don't think anyone involved in this inquiry would doubt the devastating impacts that cats have had on Australian wildlife. I assume that we all care very deeply about animal welfare. I would imagine that most people agree that the goal of improved cat management should be that wildlife is protected from cats—both feral and pet cats—and that all pet cats are well looked after by caring owners. I look forward to your questions.

The CHAIR: I might start with a couple of questions. I'm happy for either one of you to jump in. You may have seen our recent report into the pound crisis and the fact that pounds are already over capacity. We know that in councils in Victoria, for example, where they have brought in cat containment policies, they have seen a significantly higher number of cats ending up in the pound system. There's a significantly higher amount of euthanasia in those particular areas as well. How do we deal with that when we consider the reports that have come out from upper House inquiries in regard to the pound crisis and the fact that there's already not enough money in the pound system, they're already over capacity and, on top of that, we've got a major vet shortage?

JACK GOUGH: There's a couple of things. Hopefully you'll have the RSPCA giving evidence. Their Keeping Cats Safe at Home report has some really good headline figures about the impact that that education and that work with local councils has had in terms of reducing the number of nuisance cats and the number of cats coming into the pound system where that's occurring. Going to what I was saying at the start, for us, this cultural shift that needs to occur on the issue of the management of pet cats will require education and engagement, particularly with groups that are lower socio-economic. We know that where that engagement occurs, and people are keeping cats safely at home, then the number of cats that are going into those systems has been reduced. There is good evidence from Walgett in a regional council. There's good evidence from some of the metropolitan councils as well. That's one aspect that we'd really like to—

The CHAIR: Can I just jump in here? I agree with you, and I have seen that research from RSPCA but, obviously, it's quite different when you're talking about punitive laws or policies within councils versus these educational programs. Are you saying that we would need some kind of major educational program first, or do you see that possibly expanding that educational program will also have huge benefits and maybe, therefore, we don't actually need to go into the punitive space as well? They're quite different so I'm just wondering how you—

JACK GOUGH: We see that having clear rules is a really important part for making the cultural transition that we need on this issue. The implementation of those rules needs to be very sensitive to what we're trying to achieve, which is a cultural shift on how people keep cats. It's one of the key reasons that we think those rules should be allowed to be implemented at a local level. There's a really good example of the difference between what's going on in Queensland and in Victoria. In Queensland, there's a model local government set of rules, which means that cats need to be contained which, I think, 75 of 75 Queensland councils have adopted. But when we've called councils, most of them are unaware that it's a rule. There isn't any real engagement with communities. By contrast, in Victoria, the process that they've gone down is saying to councils that you can bring in rules around containment, and you have to bring in a companion animals management plan that has to be reviewed and reported on annually and remade every four years. That process has allowed a lot of community engagement such that now more than 50 per cent of Victoria councils have those rules. Swan Hill—

The CHAIR: Sorry, I'll just interrupt you there because I know that the RSPCA report concluded that councils and cat containment regulations have not been able to demonstrate any measurable reduction in cat complaints or cats wandering at large. They, therefore, don't actually support this punitive measure that you're proposing. In the Victorian councils that have actually put in to place the punitive measures, they have cited that they have had a significant increase in costs and a significant increase in euthanasia, whereas these educational programs have still been effective. They haven't had those real negative other sides of it, even if, in Victoria, they have had these educational programs running alongside it. In Victoria, we're still seeing this huge increase in euthanasia, huge increase in cost for councils and then I assume to ratepayers as well. When you can see that

education alone is still having a significant benefit, why would we want to pick education and the punitive laws which are highly problematic in Victoria when education alone is showing significant benefits?

JACK GOUGH: It's similar for dog management. We have laws, and then it is about how we educate, enforce and engage on those laws. That approach allows the framework then for communities to understand their responsibilities as pet owners, as well as giving some tools to councils, and being backed up by that education. We'd see it as there actually needs to be a suite of these things.

The CHAIR: But weren't you saying that they were doing that in Victoria? Wasn't your point that you were making before that in Victoria they are doing both—that in Victoria they are doing the educational work around the fact that they're bringing in these punitive laws? What I'm saying is, what we're hearing and what we're seeing in a lot of the submissions that we've received in this inquiry is that they are hitting the most disadvantaged communities the hardest—people who can't afford catios, people who are renting, who are being told that in their rental property they'll have to keep cats outside, people who are trying to leave domestic violence situations. It's affecting the amount of money that councils have to charge their ratepayers. It's creating a significant increase in euthanasia, despite the fact that there are educational programs running alongside them. I'm trying to understand why you would still support that model over an education-only model.

JACK GOUGH: In terms of punitive—let's be clear, what we're talking about in Victoria is a one penalty unit fine for a first offence and up to a three penalty unit fine for subsequent offences. This is not a huge imposition as a cost on people.

The CHAIR: But I wonder why we would want that at all.

JACK GOUGH: Our submission is that having that cultural shift requires us to have some clarity about what the expectations are as a pet owner. As a pet owner, there are some clear responsibilities that are associated with having that pet, and being able to keep that pet contained to your property is one of those responsibilities. We accept that that shift is not going to happen overnight. It is not something that is going to happen on a purely punitive basis, but having clear rules allows the community to start to understand those responsibilities, and it has to be backed up with funding for education, compliance and making sure that we have registration and desexing alongside it. This is a suite of rules. Education by itself is not going to shift this issue, just as punitive—

The CHAIR: But didn't you say before that the RSPCA's program—and I've looked at their report as well—has had some really significant benefits, and that's on education alone, whereas now you're saying that without the punitive side of it, education alone is not going to work.

JACK GOUGH: I'm not saying it's not going to work; I'm saying that, together, this puts a suite of pressure on the cat population that is allowed to roam, which then means we have less pressure on our native wildlife, which means we have less of our native wildlife being hunted, killed and harassed.

The CHAIR: Can I then get your response to what I said before? I know there are a lot of other people who want to ask questions. The RSPCA report has concluded that it hasn't been effective—that it hasn't reduced the number of cats wandering. I haven't found any research that has been cited in any of our submissions that there is evidence that those punitive sections have changed anything. We've seen evidence that there is a change from educational programs, yes, but we haven't seen any evidence that it's protecting wildlife, reducing the number of cats wandering and reducing the number of cat complaints where we have education and punitive measures. I am struggling to understand why you're still pushing for that model when there is no evidence for it and when education alone has been shown by the RSPCA and others to be effective at protecting wildlife.

JACK GOUGH: I might hand to Professor Legge.

SARAH LEGGE: Yes, I might add something there. To some extent, there might be no evidence because a lot of these measures are quite new and, also, monitoring the outcomes of various management actions is very scarce, including with cat management. But I think the other thing to say is that a couple of years ago we surveyed local governments right across Australia, including in New South Wales, and one of the overriding messages they sent back is that you need a multi-pronged approach—so you need a bit of everything—because you're trying to reach a very diverse audience.

The CHAIR: Was this more of a hypothesis from councils rather than based on any research?

SARAH LEGGE: It was based on their experience, I would say. I'll give you an example. I live right next to Tweed Shire, so I've done a little bit of work with them. They have invested heavily in trying to improve pet cat management in their shire. They've got areas of the shire that are zoned as "cat containment", "cat curfew" and also "cat prohibition"—so no cats are allowed in those suburbs. They've had a bit of monitoring in the bushland surrounding those suburbs to see what difference those actions make to the incidence of wandering cats in the bushland. That's a really rare dataset, and that goes back to where I started: people just don't monitor what

happens when you do different things at a local government level, so it is difficult for us to say concretely. But based on that experience—I think they did that program for about four years—they said that unless they have the power to follow up with people who are not containing their cats, for example, in a cat containment suburb, they feel toothless. They can't effect change by education alone. They had desexing programs and really cool graphics on websites so that you could actually go onto their website, click on a page and see which pet cat was turning up on camera traps in the bushland. None of those initiatives by themselves was enough to change the behaviour of a certain proportion of the public. The Tweed Shire felt they that needed law to be on their side to help them make that change.

The Hon. WES FANG: Mr Gough, in relation to your reference to the RSPCA's Keeping Cats Safe at Home program, are you aware of the report that was delivered by Portfolio Committee No. 4 in relation to the POCTA Act recently?

JACK GOUGH: I'm aware of it, but I'm not over the details of it.

The Hon. WES FANG: It cited some Government concerns in relation to the RSPCA. Are you confident that the RSPCA in New South Wales is adequately equipped to deliver those programs alone?

JACK GOUGH: I'm very confident that the New South Wales Government takes seriously their engagement with the RSPCA.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm not talking about the Government; I'm talking about the RSPCA themselves.

JACK GOUGH: My assurances around the RSPCA come from my confidence that the New South Wales Government appropriately engages with the RSPCA. It's not something that we have a particularly detailed engagement with. I'm sure the New South Wales Government makes sure that they are fulfilling their obligations appropriately. And where they are not—

The Hon. WES FANG: Part of what the inquiry uncovered was that Government doesn't have enough oversight in relation to the RSPCA. Again I ask you: Given that the inquiry cited that the Government doesn't quite have the oversight in relation to the RSPCA, do you believe that they're appropriately equipped to deliver this when you're looking at such a punitive program?

JACK GOUGH: It's not something we've done detailed policy work on.

The Hon. WES FANG: You've made a submission on it, and you've come and given evidence about it. Surely you must have done some detailed looking, research—anything.

JACK GOUGH: We haven't made a submission on the RSPCA and the way that they're structured.

The Hon. WES FANG: You've talked about the RSPCA providing part of that program in relation to cat action—

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Point of order: Given the time limit—there's been an answer given to Mr Fang. If he wants to continue badgering the witness, maybe he could take that up by way of questions on notice.

The CHAIR: It has probably gone a little bit outside the terms of reference.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I've got a number of questions, and I presume everyone has too.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm happy to hand over, Chair. I think I've achieved what I needed to do.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you to both of you for coming today and for all of your work in this area. From my perspective, we have pretty broad agreement with most of what you are presenting here today. I just want to get to the bottom of this. As you know, The Greens' cat plan talks about a statewide set of rules, 24-hour cat containment, to be implemented and enforced by councils in the same way as you would for dogs.

JACK GOUGH: Yes.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: In your opening statement, you said "to be enforced at local level", which is what we agree with as well, but then you said "council-led curfews". Can you explain why you would want a different curfew for different LGAs rather than just a statewide, same rule applies to everybody?

JACK GOUGH: Maybe I can talk to some of the broader legislative framework around that, and I know Professor Legge has some more specific examples as well. Because this is a cultural shift—it's something where we need to change the way pet owners manage cats and the way they are responsible for the pets that they look after—that cultural shift means we need buy-in and engagement at the community level. The way that Victoria has done that, and seems to have done it quite effectively, is to essentially set up—the power is given to councils

to be able to bring in rules around cat containment, cat curfews, and then they've created through their legislation, through part 5A for them, a requirement to have domestic animal management plans.

What's happened since that was first required in 2021 is that progressively councils have been bringing in those plans. They all had to have those plans in by 2021, and they have to remake them every four years. During the remake, a lot of them have started to bring in these cat containment rules at a point where they are feeling like they understand what the requirements are and they understand how they might be able to implement them, what the resourcing response is and what the education needs are. You have this push from the council and an ownership of the council. By contrast, in Queensland, that is essentially, effectively, statewide, but councils don't have any ownership of that. It's something that's just been imposed on them, yet they have to enforce it. They often aren't resourced to do so. They often don't have people within those councils who are aware of it and paying attention.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I'm worried about time. Sorry, that's why I am rushing. That is really useful. If we had statewide rules so that you could have a statewide education campaign that told everybody what was required of them in relation to their cats, and it wouldn't be in this LGA—it's a 24-hour curfew, but this one is night-time or whatever. If you had that statewide rule but then you had a requirement that you had to have this council-led management, would that then achieve both?

JACK GOUGH: I might hand to Professor Legge around some of the concerns in Indigenous communities and others as well.

SARAH LEGGE: I think it is really good to make the end goal really clear to people. The end goal is happy pets cared for by owners, kept at home. But, particularly in the immediate term, as we're heading towards that goal, there are going to be a lot of situations where that's actually really difficult to achieve and could be counterproductive. I do quite like the idea of having a really clear, statewide ambition but then allowing local governments wiggle room to develop plans that suit the local conditions and foster that sense of ownership as well. In some cases, longer transition periods might be needed to get to that end goal. I'm just worried about—there would be some Indigenous communities where a statewide rule like that would be really difficult to enforce.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Statewide but with local variations and exceptions but also, taking your point, Mr Gough, to get that engagement at a local level so that people really understand and engage with it.

JACK GOUGH: At a local level—in Victoria and in the ACT you are seeing some of this—there is also potential variability in terms of impact of cats and areas where you might have slightly different rules. There are areas where you might say, "This is an area where we actually can't have any cats roaming because it is a high conservation area," and councils being able to designate areas where they might be introducing those cat containment rules ahead of time for certain particular areas or, where they've got communities that are particularly on board already—the idea of bringing in cat containment—they might be advanced in when that comes in. We're very keen for this to be something where we are shifting in the same way that the cultural expectations is that dogs are kept controlled. In lots of countries in the world, that doesn't happen; it happens for us. But we also know, particularly in remote Indigenous communities, that just enforcing dog containment and control rules actually doesn't work straightaway, so we do need that nuance.

Having that ownership, though, for councils—I think the key element of Victoria's legislation that's really important is the requirement to create these domestic animal management plans. They have to be reviewed annually, and then they have to publish under the legislation. They have to publish the implementation report annually, and they have to be remade with community engagement every four years. That basically creates a process by which that community involvement can be ratcheted up and change can occur.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I've got time to ask you the questions, but you don't have time to answer them. Could I ask you to take two things on notice. You mentioned Victoria as compared to Queensland. Can you take on notice if there is anywhere in the world that you believe is doing this well—if there are special features? I am thinking of the US, UK, Europe and wherever—in Asia—and if there is anyone doing it well that we should be looking at as a model, and what parts of that model work. The second thing is in relation to the recommendations that Local Government NSW has given us. They have made a number of recommendations in relation to amendments to the Companion Animals Act. I was wondering if you could have a look at those, and I would be interested in your comments on those recommendations.

JACK GOUGH: I'd be happy to. Actually, I emailed the Committee to ask if we could table two things. One of them is—unfortunately, it's A3—a comparison of all of the rules between each of the State jurisdictions that we've put together. The second one is a briefing note on this from Birdlife Australia, Australian Wildlife Society, Nature Conservation Council, WIRES and ourselves on key recommendations. They were two things I was keen to table, and I am happy to. One thing I would say is that Australia is a little bit different to other countries in the make-up of our wildlife, the presence of these effective predators in our landscape, compared to

other parts of the world where maybe cats are naturally present. Cats are an introduced species in Australia and particularly impactful on our native wildlife.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Could I please put one question on notice?

The CHAIR: Sorry, I did tell the Hon. Aileen MacDonald that I would throw to her next.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I can do the same; I will put two questions on notice as well.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: We're going to load you up with questions, I'm afraid.

JACK GOUGH: That's all right.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: In your recommendations, you basically said something about changes or amendments to the Companion Animals Act. Local councils are empowered and allocate funding for that. Following on from the Hon. Peter Primrose's questions, what specific amendments to the Act would you recommend and what funding models do you suggest to sustainably support cat management programs? Do you have a figure on that—like, what amount of funding, do you think? Those are my questions on notice.

JACK GOUGH: Yes, excellent. I will just say part 68A of the Victorian Domestic Animals Act and part 23 are the two elements.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Gough, I will ask you to take them on notice because we're already over time. I believe there's one more to put on notice.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Professor Legge, I'm really curious about your research and your views and opinions in relation to the trap, neuter, release support programs and the assumption, I think, that cats are always in the environment—that there's a place for them, therefore, we release them. Any work or views that you have on that method or program and are able to provide, I would be very interested in.

SARAH LEGGE: Yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: The final one relates to the Natural Resources Commission report about reducing risks in the future, which makes some poignant findings about law changes in New South Wales. It references some of your work, particularly in relation to biosecurity as well and the cost of, I think, \$6 billion or whatever. Could you provide the Committee with any summary or pertinent points in relation to the findings of the NRC report?

SARAH LEGGE: Okay.

The CHAIR: Thank you both for your evidence today. There were questions, obviously, taken on notice. The secretariat will be in contact with you in relation to those questions on notice, and I thank you again for your time today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

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

The CHAIR: I welcome our next witness. Ms Vesk, thank you for your time in giving evidence today. Do you have a short opening statement you'd like to make?

KRISTINA VESK: Complex problems don't have easy solutions. Pretending they do is unhelpful. It delays actions that could be taken now, and it creates mistrust and alienation rather than cooperation and understanding. As Cat Protection says in our submission, there are things local councils could do now to assist communities with cat management, but only a few councils do much at all. We work with domestic cats, so that means we work with people. As Cat Protection has long argued, we need to take a One Health, One Welfare approach to successfully tackle issues that arise when there are seemingly intractable collisions between people, animals and the environment. That requires effort, patience and knowledge, and it requires trust and cooperation. Early-age desexing of cats is critical. Intensive programs targeted to areas of high need, combined with helpful education and support, are proven to make an impact. Councils could make a difference now by supporting such programs, collecting data, engaging with their communities and sharing education resources that have been developed by animal welfare charities like Cat Protection, instead of saying their hands are tied. Of course more funding for programs would be helpful, but there's still capacity to achieve more with the little we already have.

The CHAIR: Thank you again for coming today. Is it fair to say that councils currently rely very heavily on rescue organisations to do a lot of the heavy lifting when it comes to cats in regards to desexing and rehoming? And, if that is true, most of these groups are completely un-resourced in regards to government funding. What will it mean to them if we're going to then see, say, cat containment, punitive laws brought in? What would it mean for those rescue groups when we see more cats coming into council pounds?

KRISTINA VESK: The first thing is, yes, councils do depend on unpaid rescues, charities and other informal groups very much. I think I noted in our submission that Liverpool council received a grand total of three cats in an entire financial year; same with Inner West Council. It's obvious someone else is doing something or, if no-one's doing anything, then there's a problem. The first thing is, if they can't do anything now, how are they going to police that? Where's that going to come from? Where are those resources going to come from? What is the police force of rangers they're going to hire to catch cats?

The CHAIR: Could I just unpack what you're saying there? If they don't have the funding now for some of these other programs you mentioned in your opening statement—is that what you mean?

KRISTINA VESK: Absolutely. I think there are many things now, even with the little funding that they have—and I make the point, councils are really different; some are more wealthy—but there are things they can do that don't cost a lot of money. That includes education; that includes, basically, their websites. It includes a different culture. It includes listening to their companion animal management staff and listening to their communities, working with them. I think I read in one of the submissions about an independent rescue person who was called upon by council to do certain things helping cats in the community, and then it charged him a great deal of money to register cats. I mean, that sort of practice is shocking. And how does that build trust? How does that solve issues?

Previous speakers spoke about culture. There's a lot of culture we have to change in councils. A lot of us working in the charitable sector are working really hard on positive education campaigns. I think our research is showing that most cat owners keep their cats to their property or curfewed at night. There's a way to go, and that's not always possible. It's not always as essential as it might be if you're bordering bushland. They're really different environments. And I just don't see that there is anything to be gained in pursuing a kind of one size fits all, because it won't and it doesn't. I just think it creates barriers to working together, and anything that's difficult needs people to work together.

The CHAIR: You mentioned the fact that there's currently no funding, so at the moment the councils heavily rely on charitable organisations to step in and do most of the work around cat management and cat protection. If there suddenly was this bucket of money that could be put towards having rangers for something like punitive cat containment laws, do you feel that that money would be better spent on another aspect that would help cats and wildlife, and achieve more than using that bucket of money for rangers?

KRISTINA VESK: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: Can you tell me what that would be?

KRISTINA VESK: We have been working with Fairfield City and City of Sydney over many years where they put money into their community, working with us on subsidised cat desexing programs. The \$1.5 million grant that we got from the New South Wales Government, where we're doing the DIVA program and

targeting that in a few council areas, is going really well. Again, it's going to depend on the environment, but if you had a pot of money, spending it to, first of all, intervene and have cats desexed early is critical because it stops the breeding cycle. Secondly, work with your community, because a lot of people can't afford containment. A lot of people are renting; they're not allowed to do things. Councils don't even necessarily make it easy. Some of them will have things on their website saying, "You can build something, but you might need approval." They just don't make it easy.

The CHAIR: By that you mean a catio structure?

KRISTINA VESK: Yes, catproof fencing and things like that. They can do demonstration projects. They can assist with protecting wildlife in their areas through other means, not just looking at cats but looking at water, shade, trees, continuity of trees and their planning when they're doing new developments. I think part of the issue here is that we have this moral panic that's directed at cats alone and there are so many things that impact on native wildlife—animals and plants. We can't just look at cats as though that one thing is going to create this miracle of a revival of nature. The thing is, too, that the cats belong to people. Even in the case of cats who aren't living inside a house with a person, there are a lot of people who care for them deeply, and we have to consider their wellbeing. How is it okay to mentally torture people the way Newcastle Port did with the shooting of cats at Stockton Breakwall? You just can't do things like that. It's obscene. It goes back to the earlier point. Yes, spend the money on constructive, positive things that do minimal damage, cause minimal harm and maximise benefit.

The CHAIR: You've hinted that it would further disadvantage communities who are already at a disadvantage for whatever reason, whether they're renting or have financial constraints because of the cost-of-living crisis or things like that. Can you delve a bit more into how these punitive laws would further affect communities already struggling?

KRISTINA VESK: It's going to a point of being extremely la-di-da and saying that you're only allowed to have a cat if you're rich. That's the bottom line of it. You can't have one if you rent, even though we've fought really hard for rental laws to be improved so that people who rent can have pets. If you don't have a lot of money, it can be difficult. Again, this is still assuming they are owned pet cats, because we know that community cats exist and there are people who are trying to bring those populations under control, to desex them and to reduce those populations over time. But that will take time. I think that there is a massive social justice issue with simply saying, "You have to have all these fancy things in order to have a cat." Cats bring a lot of joy to many people.

They're still quite expensive to keep and look after, but a lot less than some other pets, and they make a difference to people's lives. People get up in the morning because they look after a cat. They make friends in their community because they're looking after cats. I think I included in our submission some of the comments from our DIVA clients that are really telling. One is a pensioner. She said, "These cats chose my garden." She didn't choose them. Somehow, the cat network has said, "This lady is friendly." She was trying to do her best for them but she couldn't afford to desex all those cats. Until our program came and assisted her, they would've kept breeding and she would have been distressed, the community would have been distressed—her neighbours, the cats. But if you can get in with an intervention early and accept that this is a reality—we can't live in a fantasy thinking everyone is going to live in this house with cat-proof fencing and all the lovely things that I know a lot of people have, but everyone can't afford that.

The CHAIR: I love the name of your program, DIVA. For Hansard, can you tell us what that acronym is?

KRISTINA VESK: It stands for desexing, identification, vaccination assistance for cats.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Is there anywhere in the world, including Australia, that you think is doing a great job in relation to managing cat populations—that you could say to us, "They're doing well. You should have a close look at what they're doing"?

KRISTINA VESK: I think, as the people before me said, the experiences aren't necessarily transferrable: different environments, different populations. I think that, as well as looking at the built environment when we look at situations of cat populations, and the social environment, we can't just look—and, certainly, the natural environment. I would say I'm not aware.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Could you take that on notice and think about it? I take the point that was made earlier by the Invasive Species witnesses that there are issues—different countries are different. Even within Australia, are there any places that are doing it well? And the same question I asked previously—maybe you'd like to take it on notice. Local Government NSW has raised a number of significant issues in its submission that it believes need to be clarified in the Companion Animals Act, including specifying the powers that a council has to seize a cat. There is a whole range of those. Could you take on notice those recommendations to amend the

Companion Animals Act? The secretariat will provide those to you. I would be interested in your comments as to whether you'd support those or not.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: The DIVA program that you mentioned was funded last year and runs out or has run out—

KRISTINA VESK: No, it was for 2023-24, 2024-25. Because we just received it at the beginning of July, it took us a few months to set up, find vets, work out the program. It didn't really hit the ground at all until about September last year, and then it was sort of a soft start. It has quite taken off. We've desexed more than 2,000 cats through that program now.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Is there one specific area you're doing it in?

KRISTINA VESK: We're focused on Fairfield, Canterbury-Bankstown, City of Sydney, Bathurst, and we also did work with Narrabri. We have worked with Narrabri and Bathurst for a long time and we have good relationships with those councils. We'd love to do more regional work. It can be difficult in finding vets, but, yes, that's sort of the target areas.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Because it's only been operating a short time, have you been able to measure the effectiveness or the impact that the early desexing has had in those areas?

KRISTINA VESK: At this stage, we're relying on the feedback from the clients. We have not been able to get the councils to collect data that we requested at the outset so that we could measure using any kind of data they collect. We are working on mapping where we're doing this. Basically, the answer is we will be looking at that and doing that research ourselves. We don't have a lot to go on from councils.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You also mentioned in your submission the Good Neighbour Project. How do you think councils could be encouraged to take on projects like the Good Neighbour Project? What could the Government do to encourage more councils?

KRISTINA VESK: The Office of Local Government and the Minister at the time were very supportive of it, and a handful of councils, but basically it's a stack of resources—videos, materials in community languages, facts sheets, do-it-yourself enclosure instructions. We created a website called catcare.org.au, which is the people who work with cats.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Yes, I saw that.

KRISTINA VESK: We've sent information about that to councils. We offered to support them with activities, projects in their communities. We put out an ideas sheet on things they could do. I think it really is kind of up to them to then say, instead of doing a once-a-year microchipping day, to be continually engaged with the community in these matters and to develop and work with their companion animal management teams. A lot of councils have superb people working in that area and they're not necessarily given the time or resources to do that sort of education work. I think there's a real opportunity there that is being missed.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I have other questions, but I'll put them as supplementary.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you for everything that you do. I still have friends who have adopted cats from your premises who are just delighted with them. I just wanted to talk about the desexing aspects. I've heard from a lot of people who say that desexing is pretty much the most effective way of managing cat populations. I hear what you say about the barriers when it comes to registration. Under that DIVA program, how much per cat do you think the desexing cost would be?

KRISTINA VESK: You sort of have a range of prices with vets. They are discounting for us. Let's say around \$300 for health check, pain relief and desexing. It depends sometimes. Male cats are a lot cheaper. The surgery's a lot faster, but if you average sort of that—I'm trying to remember—I think we put it at about \$350 including vaccination and chipping¹. But it depends. We also have discount desexing referral programs that aren't DIVA. The Ipsos report showed also that there's a difference between what people think desexing will cost and what it does. A lot of people put off or delay it because they think it's going to cost more than it might. Most vets will lose money doing desexing because it's one of those things they see as a social service. Certainly, the vets who work with us are super generous with discounting. Is that a sufficient answer for you?

¹ In [correspondence](#) to the committee received on 19 January 2025, Ms Kristina Vesk provided a clarification to her evidence

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: It's useful. For an individual to get their cat desexed it's going to be a bit more than that, you would think, if they're getting it as a one-off rather than as part of a program?

KRISTINA VESK: They could probably, it depends, get between about \$150 to \$200 for desexing, but then that doesn't include the chipping and it doesn't include vaccination. Our Adopt-a-Stray program is \$100 and that's subsidised by us. If people find a stray cat and they don't qualify for the DIVA program and they want to keep the stray cat and bring it into their home, they can go through our program and we provide all the support for them on cat care information and refer them to the vet. They get all those things done for \$100.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I was speaking with the head of cat adoption at one pound who told me that out of all the stray cats they get brought in, 90 per cent are not microchipped. So only 10 per cent of all cats that they get through their doors are microchipped. Do you think that if we were to introduce a cat containment strategy or laws that there would need to be a period of time so that people could microchip their cats first?

KRISTINA VESK: I think a lot of those cats aren't owned by a single person in the first place. We don't really have a census of that population, but there are many cats who aren't owned by a single person. I know from our DIVA program there are people who would be willing to have those cats desexed to contain that population, but when they find out they also have to chip and register, then they are not prepared to do that because they're unable to take that cat and say, "This is my cat", and they can't do all those things.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: So that adoption bit is the problem—taking that, whatever you want to call it, semi-owned or community cat?

KRISTINA VESK: I think we have a few different categories. There are owned cats, and in those cases it's letting people know the importance of early-age desexing. But, generally, most people are getting their cats from pounds and shelters where they're already desexed. It's a very small minority of cats who are adopted by breeders, but most of the registered breeders are desexing before they rehome. A lot of it is informal acquisition. It doesn't make it less meaningful, but it does mean that the cat hasn't necessarily had all that work done.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Understood.

The CHAIR: This came up as a recommendation in the pound inquiry in regard to cat rescue organisations also receiving funding. When we talk about cat management more broadly and how we actually care for all the different cat populations, is part of the solution funding rescue groups to rehome these animals, to run these programs of mass desexing? Is that a huge part of the solution? Can you talk a little bit about that?

KRISTINA VESK: I think it would be enormously helpful. I know with some of the clients we've been working with through DIVA, they have been doing rescue out of their own pockets. By that, I don't mean they're the people who are the rescue organisations taking cats away from pounds, but the ones who are finding them on the street and looking after them and trying to find homes for them. The feedback from them has been phenomenal in saying, "I'm rehoming a desexed kitten." That's amazing. I feel so confident; I don't have to rely on the person going ahead and doing those things. By that point, too, it can become really expensive because the cat might be older. Because they're not adopted from a pound or shelter, there are registration costs. It becomes quite expensive for the person, which, again, is not necessarily the entire barrier, but when people have to save up, that's what Professor Jules Beatty called the pregnancy gap. That's when they're planning to desex the cat, they have not been able to do it and, the next minute, the cat has had their first litter. That can be as young as five months old.

The CHAIR: I have one more quickly. I know that as part of the grant that you received, you have desexed over 1,800 cats to date. Do you have any indication as to how many reduced kittens and litters that impact would have had? You can take that on notice, if you like. I'd be interested to know—1,800 desexed cats is a lot—what kind of flow-on impact that has.

KRISTINA VESK: You could do lots of different sorts of estimations, but even if you just imagined that half of them weren't going to be desexed—so that's 900—they could've had three litters by now of, say, four cats each. I can't do that maths in my head right now, but it's a lot. The impact is enormous, particularly because cats are very fertile. Sadly, the kittens don't always have a very good life in these big populations if they're not desexed, because of fighting, disease if they're not vaccinated—all those things. Everything becomes better with an early intervention of vaccination and desexing. It becomes more manageable, and the people who are doing that caring work have better mental health. I can't thank them enough. They're using their own money, their own car and their own time. They might be the pensioner that I mentioned before, but a lot of them are working as well. It's hard work and they're doing this because they can't look away. They see what is there and they see themselves as needing to help. I think that councils can recognise that, respect it and work with those people.

The CHAIR: Thank you for your evidence and for your time today. If there were any questions taken on notice, the secretariat will be in contact with you. If any members have questions later, we can send those through to you.

(The witness withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Dr GEMMA MA, Community Veterinarian and Project Manager, Keeping Cats Safe at Home, RSPCA NSW, affirmed and examined

Mr TROY WILKIE, Senior Government Relations Manager, RSPCA 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 a short opening statement you'd like to make?

TROY WILKIE: Yes, we both have a short one. Thank you, Chair and Committee members, for the opportunity to present RSPCA NSW's perspective on cat management. Our submission offers a balanced, evidence-based approach to addressing this complex issue, balancing environmental protection, animal welfare and community needs cost-effectively. Drawing on my experience as a senior adviser to the New South Wales Minister for Local Government, and my current role with RSPCA NSW, I hope to share a decade's worth of engagement on this topic with councils, government officials and animal welfare organisations.

I am joined by Dr Gemma Ma, a veterinarian with a PhD in human-animal interactions and companion animal population management. Through Keeping Cats Safe at Home, a four-year project run by the State Government through the Environmental Trust, she has led groundbreaking research on free-roaming cat management and human behaviour change. We thank the State Government for providing \$2½ million dollars to fund this program, and acknowledge Minister Sharpe's continued support of the program and Minister Hoening's continued interest in the issues of the inquiry.

If cats were not already here, and somebody proposed to introduce them, I'm confident the public would either reject the proposal outright, or require that they be contained to a person's property as we already do with every other domestic animal. However, the financial, social, animal welfare and ethical impacts of reversing longstanding free-roaming policies are significant. Councils are responsible for helping cats that are homeless or lost; however, many councils refuse to manage cats altogether. This is very disappointing given that councils are absolutely tremendous at delivering local services. Some cite a lack of resources, despite having adequate funds they choose to spend elsewhere. Others justify it by claiming that the Act prohibits them from doing so. Since the mid-2000s, OLG has issued circulars and guidance to councils outlining their obligations in this context. At the end of this, I'll table circular A719010 as one recent example.

The State Government also plays a critical role in cat management, and can do more to ensure that proven and cost-effective cat management measures are well resourced. We welcome the Minister for Local Government's commitment to conducting a holistic review of the Companion Animals Act and the companion animals fund, and congratulate OLG's staged launch of the new companion animal registry. In February 2022 the State Government announced \$68.2 million of animal welfare funding for the 2023-24 budget. However, the following 2024-25 budget allocates \$21 million for animal welfare, delivering a 69.2 per cent reduction in animal welfare funding. I'll table four documents at the end that demonstrate that.

The problems we face are a policy choice that put an unsustainable burden on charities and rehoming organisations. This inquiry presents an opportunity for local governments and State government to consider the regularly substandard working conditions and immense levels of stress put on pound and charity staff and volunteers to change this policy choice. Targeted cat desexing programs offer the best return on investment to address the goals of ethically managing cats and helping their carers become responsible guardians. I'll hand over to Dr Ma to discuss this in detail before we open up for questions.

GEMMA MA: Good morning, and thank you for this opportunity. We face three separate but related cat management challenges in New South Wales. The first is owned pet cats who roam, creating a nuisance for neighbours and predated wildlife. The second is populations of unowned or stray cats who often have poor welfare. They fill up our shelters and they're still euthanised by the thousands each year. The third is the free living or feral cats that constantly feed into urban centres searching for food, and they contribute to the unowned cat population. RSPCA NSW had almost 7,000 cats come through our doors last year, most of whom were sick, injured or infant strays. Our call centre receives close to 800 calls each month requesting assistance with stray cats. Stray cats are the largest cohort of animals we care for as our organisation, far exceeding even our cruelty cases and surrendered animals. Right now we have more the 500 orphaned kittens in the homes of our volunteer foster carers.

Because the overall statewide need is far beyond what we can accommodate, we have to prioritise. We only take in the sickest, the most injured and the youngest infant strays. This issue of unowned or stray cats is related to the issue of owned cats roaming. About half of all the 5.3 million pet cats in Australia were passively acquired by people who hadn't planned to become a cat owner. Many of these cats started their lives in that unowned population—when people had a stray kitten turn up on their doorstep or they found a cat at work. If we

reduce the number of people who are accidentally ending up with a pet cat, we could have millions of fewer owned cats who need to be contained.

Our approach to cat management at RSPCA NSW is holistic, humane and evidence based. We have four key recommendations. The first is to fund statewide targeted cat desexing programs. This is the only method of cat population management that has proven to work. We have shown this approach consistently results in rapid reductions of free-roaming cat population density and council nuisance complaints, pound intake and euthanasia. For example, where we have done this through Keeping Cats Safe at Home, for two years shelter intake has reduced in Parramatta by 74 per cent and in Campbelltown by 63 per cent, and euthanasia has been reduced in Parramatta by 98 per cent and in Campbelltown by 81 per cent.

The year before we started Keeping Cats Safe at Home in Walgett in remote north-west New South Wales, the council impounded 274 cats, and all 274 cats were euthanised. One year after our targeted desexing program started, Walgett impounded two cats, and they were both successfully rehomed. This approach works, and it works quickly, but it needs to be funded. Our second recommendation is to encourage voluntary cat containment. At RSPCA NSW, we recommend and encourage the containment of pet cats to their owner's property to keep them safe and to reduce impacts on wildlife.

Our research through Keeping Cats Safe at Home demonstrates that the uptake of cat containment is increasing over time, and that this style of cat management is becoming a social norm and community expectation. Programs like our successful Keeping Cats Safe at Home initiative take a human behaviour change approach to encourage this continued shift to containment. We do not recommend mandating cat containment for multiple reasons, which we've outlined in detail in our submission.

Our third recommendation is to reform the Companion Animals Act, mainly to clarify the role of councils in managing unowned cats. We recommend explicitly requiring councils to accept owned and unowned cats surrendered by members of the public, and to respond to requests for assistance from the community. Cats don't respect local government boundaries, so a unified approach between all New South Wales councils is essential for us to progress. Our fourth recommendation is that we invest in more humane and evidence-based methods of feral cat management. We welcome your questions and a broader discussion on these matters.

TROY WILKIE: I will table those five different documents that I mentioned. There are copies if you want to hand them out.

The CHAIR: Thank you again for your time today. You note in your submission that mandatory cat containment laws would likely lead to increased rates of abandonment and the surrender of cats due to financial reasons. Can you expand a little bit further on that and on what the impact is there, particularly on disadvantaged groups?

GEMMA MA: We're already seeing cats being abandoned at increased rates due to the cost of living and the housing crisis. People are having to move and are not able to take their cats with them. That's happening all the time. Those cats become unowned cats, and they contribute to this unowned cat problem. Adding additional barriers on effective cat ownership just makes that problem worse. We definitely suspect that cats will be **surrendered** by people who can't keep them anymore, or cats will be abandoned where there aren't accessible surrender options.

The CHAIR: There were recent changes to the rental laws which allow, for example, for a landlord to insist that a cat has to be kept outside. How would these balance? If someone was renting and their landlord said they can rent there but they have to keep their cat outside, and then all of a sudden there is this mandatory cat containment, how would that work? Will that mean that the RSPCA, councils and rescue groups will have even more cats being abandoned?

GEMMA MA: Exactly. That happens already, where people have to move, and they can't find somewhere that will let them keep their cats. We have more than 200 cats on our surrender waitlist right now—people who can't keep their cats any more and are trying to rehome them. So it's just going to make it worse. We're concerned about the equity issues that creates and that different populations are going to be affected by that change in different ways.

TROY WILKIE: It also really clearly highlights the issue with having most laws being statewide or countrywide and then putting in some LGA-based laws. If you have a statewide law which says you can make a tenant keep an animal outside but then one LGA chooses to opt in for a "contain" policy, the two are not interacting or talking to each other and it creates a lot of problems and conflict. It would absolutely increase the number of cats that are seized by community and by rangers being brought into the charities and pounds that are already overrun.

The CHAIR: Do you have any prediction rates of what the increase in euthanasia would be if these cat containment laws were to come in?

GEMMA MA: It's an interesting question because over the last few years there has been increasing pressure on councils to reduce their euthanasia rates. The unintended consequence of that is councils don't take the cats in anymore, because they don't want to look bad to their communities. I wouldn't be surprised if that continued and the councils would prefer to not act, prefer to not do any of the cat management activities so that they don't have to increase their euthanasia rates. We're already having trouble rehoming the really friendly, healthy young—even the kittens are sitting in our shelters for months looking for homes. There just aren't the homes for all those cats. If more cats are coming in, then it's inevitable that the euthanasia rates are going to go up.

The CHAIR: At the pound inquiry as well, particularly when we went out to regional pounds, we heard a lot about regional pounds having problems with a lot of cats coming in that weren't microchipped or registered, but they were clearly a companion cat. This wasn't a wild cat living on the street. This was clearly someone's cat; they're very friendly. Even though we have laws around people microchipping and registering their cat, there's recognition that a lot of people don't realise they have to do both. A lot of people are avoiding the extra cost of doing that, for example, or they just don't realise that they're supposed to do it. How does that interact with a mandatory cat containment law? We kept hearing at pounds that these animals were coming in and they couldn't locate the family of these animals. What happens if, suddenly, there's a cat outside and they're not microchipped and registered?

TROY WILKIE: The other way of looking at cat containment, if it was brought in immediately—for example, from tomorrow we have cat containment—and the councils were proactive in implementing and policing those laws, you'd be looking at hundreds of thousands of cats being euthanised within a couple of months because there are so many cats that are passively owned. For a person on a low income, if a cat starts coming by, you start feeding it regularly and you've got a bit of a connection with the cat—getting registration, desexing and a health check at retail rates at a vet, you're looking at 700 or 800 bucks. If you're on minimum wage, you just can't not pay rent and not eat that week, so this is not going to happen. It's an insurmountable barrier for that person to take on all of those costs and all of that pressure to do what they intrinsically want to do. Rather than the opposite of policing and enforcing that method, which will create bad outcomes, encouraging and teaching people that they can access subsidised or free desexing and getting the registration done—then they can have that cat, make it theirs, build that connection to the cat so that they want to protect it from cars and other problems in the community—will also protect the environment.

The CHAIR: It sounds like we're still trying to build animal-friendly rental laws. We've got a veterinary shortage, pounds and rescue groups are over capacity, the pet registry is still being built and isn't fully functioning at the moment. There are all these other things that are going on in this space. Would you say, based on what you've just said, Mr Wilkie, that we're not ready for cat containment laws in New South Wales?

TROY WILKIE: Yes, we definitely aren't. That's why we've said if we'd gone from 1788 until now and not had cats coming to Australia, we wouldn't be introducing them and saying let them roam free. It's an apex predator that breeds rapidly. That would be a really mind-boggling decision. But we are in the situation that we are currently in. To change that, investing in targeted desexing programs, like what Keeping Cats Safe at Home offers, is the absolute best outcome that helps the environment, helps people who have got cats, protects animal welfare and is the most cost effective. If you consider catching and euthanising a huge volume of cats, it's going to cost a fortune.

The stats that Gemma was reading out just before are phenomenal. We're talking about a program that was \$2½ million across four years and 11 LGAs. It's about 200 grand per council in four years. That would cover two rangers in one LGA for one year, with benefits. The amount of money you'd have to spend to do the cat containment overnight would be just phenomenal and would have lots of really bad, adverse outcomes, versus the cheaper, more effective, proven method that we can implement from tomorrow.

The CHAIR: Dr Ma, I just want to ask you about the education program that you run. It sounds like it's really effective. I asked some questions this morning, because it sounds like this educational campaign is working. It's actually encouraging people, it's changing those social norms, and it's getting people to actually have their cats indoors whereas, in other States—in Victoria, for example—in councils where they've got both the education and the punitive laws, we're still seeing these massive increases in euthanasia rates and we're still seeing it disproportionately affect disadvantaged communities. Can you talk a little bit more about the education program, how successful it is, and what we need to do more to really build on that program to get even more success?

GEMMA MA: We've worked with an expert in human behaviour change and human psychology, Dr Lynette McLeod, to design our intervention and to do a whole bunch of social science research along with it.

We found that the main barrier for people keeping their cats contained was their psychological capability—knowing how to do it, feeling confident to do it and persisting to make that change in behaviour. What we've focused on is providing people with accessible information on how to successfully keep their cats contained, providing them with encouragement, creating a community of practice of cat caregivers who are keeping their cats at home, and all of that sort of thing.

What we found with our social science research—we did some focus groups recently, based on an ad campaign that we developed—that there's this huge pressure on cat caregivers who are allowing their cats to roam. They feel really victimised and demonised by their communities. They are kind of underground; they don't want to talk about it. They have very much heard this message. They know everyone wants them to keep their cats contained. It doesn't necessarily mean they can do it with the cat they have now, which can be really difficult for people. I think that highlights the need that if containment was going to be mandated it would have to be grandfathered.

There are a whole bunch of cats that would not cope with that change. But it's happening. If we keep that messaging going, we're heading in that direction. People are starting to do it, but we need to accompany it with the programs that make that easier, making sure people aren't ending up with a cat by accident, and that people, if they're getting a pet cat, have really thought it through: "Can I meet all its needs in a contained home? Or maybe a cat's not the right pet for me." We don't want people who are just ending up with a cat on their doorstep and thinking, "Well, it needs somewhere to go. If it goes to the pound, it's going to be killed." We want to prevent that from happening. That's where the targeted desexing has to go, alongside the social marketing and the human behaviour change.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you very much for coming along and for the amazing program—the KCSAH program. I just wanted to drill down into this—the Chair was asking what would happen if we put mandatory cat containment in place. Clearly, there are lots of different ways of implementing mandatory cat containment, and I agree with you when it comes to the equity aspects, when it comes to the enforcement of that, but we know that a lot of our laws are not so much about enforcement but are about changing norms. If we were to acknowledge and embark on a plan of cat containment that had a mandatory cat containment law involved in it, along with education and a whole bunch of other things, but did have a grandfathered approach so that it did not apply to older cats but only applied to newly homed cats et cetera, would you be as opposed to the concept of having it in the law, or is the concern that it just wouldn't be implemented in the right way?

TROY WILKIE: I think the latter is a really big concern. That's why we're saying there are a lot of things we can do for less cost at the start that will have a huge impact for all the outcomes we're trying to reach, from environmental to animal welfare, to helping people that can't look after their cat and animal welfare. We can reach all those things for less cost and have a much bigger impact by funding that for a couple of years, and then we can have a look at it, review it and see where we're up to. Whereas putting in a date when it comes into place, I think, certainly would change the conversation around things in that human behaviour management part of things. The campaigns we've had running have already been achieving that as well.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I think the counter is—certainly the main reason The Greens have been so keen on cat containment is because of the impact on wildlife. There's a view that if we just continue on in this educational perspective it's not going to be quick enough and we need to be acting much quicker than that. If we were to put in cat containment laws that were also backed with that statewide education campaign that had a desexing and microchipping campaign, had the grandfathering and then also had a real sort of gentle approach to enforcement to begin with, would you still have the same opposition to the idea of it?

GEMMA MA: My thinking on this has changed a lot over the last four years that I've been working on Keeping Cats Safe at Home. Originally I did think, "We're going to have to change the legislation. We have to; that's the only way it's going to happen." My thinking has changed because, one, changing the legislation is only one of a whole suite of behaviour change tools that you can use to shift human behaviour on this issue. It's only one, and it's a very blunt one. My big concern is it has these big equity issues. I will give you the example of where we've been working in Walgett, which is a very low socio-economic community. It's also a community with a high proportion of First Nations people.

That is the one area where—we've been offering free cat desexing and free microchipping, the same as we've done in 11 councils across New South Wales. It's the one area where people choose not to microchip. Everywhere else, everyone is like, "Yes, please. Free microchip—great!" In Walgett they don't want the microchips because they're scared that, down the track, the council is going to come and give them a fine for not registering, because it has happened before. Overpolicing happens. It's a matter of inequity in the way the law is applied, and it has inequitable outcomes for that group of people. So when you say councils can choose or not choose to enforce the legislation, that leads down the path of potential inequality. That's a concern for us.

The other concern with mandating containment at the moment is it will just create another really big barrier to us doing the interventions on unowned cat management. At the moment, already, the requirement to microchip or the requirement to register and pay the annual permit fee for the cats not desexed before four months of age is a huge barrier for people participating in our programs. They might be caring for 20 stray cats in their backyard, and they've been doing that for a long time. They're really keen to see that situation resolved. But they're stray cats; they're not their cats. They're just doing a compassionate thing and feeding them.

They're very happy for them to be desexed and for them to have better welfare, but then they have to have all of them registered. For one cat that might be \$150 to pay the registration fee and the annual permit fee. For 20 cats that becomes very expensive—for anybody, let alone someone who's living in a one-bedroom housing commission unit who's on a disability pension and all the other things. That's why adding an extra barrier of having to keep that cat contained as well just becomes insurmountable, and people just can't participate, or they are breaking the law. That's our big concern. It's just too early. There are too many other—

TROY WILKIE: I really appreciate your point that you feel like we've been talking about education campaigns for a long time, but they've not been really funded. Even Keeping Cats Safe at Home has achieved a lot in the short time it has been going for. In those 11 LGAs, you have got momentous change happening within two years of it being really up and running. You could make that program statewide for, like, \$25 million per year, roughly. When you think about the cost of building a pound normally being \$30 million or \$40 million these days, it's not a huge cost and it would then have those same very quick and proven solutions getting delivered statewide. We could do that for a couple of years and see where we're at. And then, definitely—would it lower our concerns? It would be the short answer. But I'd rather do that funding first, because it's what's always talked about and never coming through. Law changes will happen once you've passed them.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: On page 9 you talk about trapping and euthanasia, and how that's proven ineffective because of the way that populations will fill whatever resources are available. Could you just talk through that point? I think it's one of the points of contention.

GEMMA MA: I think there's only really been one study on that type of an intervention, because no-one does it because it's not in line with community expectations. For that study, they trapped and killed a whole bunch of cats and found that, actually, the population rebounded much quicker. The population was fitter and bred more effectively after you'd done that culling. The modelling shows that you need to do a really high rate of culling. You need to kill about 70 per cent of the cats, and you need to do that year on year for about 10 years or something before you start to get the population under control, which is just a huge amount of euthanasia and logistically difficult to do. Cats are hard to catch. They don't always get into traps.

Also, all these unowned cats, which is quite a big population of cats, they all have people who are looking after them. They usually have several people who are looking after them. Those people, once they get wind that people are trying to trap and kill them, they start to hide them and they start to sabotage your trapping attempts. They'll let the cats out of traps. Once a cat's gone into a trap once, it's really hard to get them to go into it again, so it just makes it really hard. We find that when we're doing the desexing programs. If we haven't got every single caregiver of those unowned cats onboard with our program, they sabotage it. They let the cats out of the traps because they're worried that the cats are going to get hurt. Logistically, it's a really difficult way to manage the problem, especially when we have better options.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Dr Ma, thank you for your in-depth and up-front experience with cats over years. I'm just curious—and my colleague touched on it—around the RSPCA presenting a review that would say something should be out of the toolbox, rather than saying, "Actually, we should have all tools." I noted that a bunch of other advocacy groups have changed their position to saying, "Hey, actually, we should have localised programs." Your Walgett example is one of the really stark examples of, perhaps, communities that are always going to have to have localised controls and provisions because of those equity issues, which aren't going to change over the next two years, for example.

Do you think that if a local government area is saying, "We really want to be able to have controls now, in the Local Government Act or around companion animals," and they're actually calling on the State for that, that's something we should be able to do? The example, obviously, is Tweed, where you have got high biodiversity—it's literally an Australian biodiversity hotspot—and you have education programs that have been running and are very successful, but you have the people on the ground saying, "If we just had some more controls, we could really start to control cat populations in our LGA." Would you support those provisions being enabled or enlivened on those kinds of bases?

GEMMA MA: We have seen, through Keeping Cats Safe at Home, that there are really diverse situations with cat management among different councils. Councils like the Northern Beaches, for example, and Tweed, where they are relatively high socio-economic areas, they don't really have populations of unowned cats the way

they do in other areas, like Fairfield and Canterbury Bankstown, where there are huge populations of **unowned** cats. Yes, the situation is really different and it is more about containment of owned cats. Those councils might be at a point where legislation is the logical next behaviour change tool that you would use.

I don't know how effective, on a larger scale, that's going to be across New South Wales if you allow those councils to implement something that's different to everywhere else, but I think that is a valid point. Potentially, that could be done in a different way than mandating containment, through changing the Companion Animals Act to give councils more powers to make more instances where a cat can be called a "nuisance cat", for example, so making the offence that the cat is entering someone else's property rather than the offence being that the cat has left its own property, for example.

TROY WILKIE: Yes, the Tweed is a great example, and I think there might be some examples where you'd go, "It probably would work here in that particular instance," but, certainly where across Sydney you've got one LGA that does it and one that doesn't, it's absolutely not going to work. It is going to have some really bad outcomes overall. But there might be some instances where it can work. I also think that, in general, most councils are not in a position where they've gotten to that last measure. You say it's removing a tool out of the toolbox. I'd say it's the least effective and most expensive, so it's the one you would leave until last on any logical scale of how you go about tackling the issue. If some councils are already at that point, it might be a special application to look at that in the future. I think the councils are very few and far between that are at that last resort point to really push onto it.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you think that, if you could have an indicator, like you were looking at a particular ground bird species that's looking at extinction, that might be a case where you would say that the balance here has tipped and we need to do more and provide rules about cat containment to protect a local population of threatened species where cats are a key threatening process? Would the RSPCA be open to embracing that kind of understanding?

TROY WILKIE: We're always open to looking at anything on a case-by-case basis so we can get down to the details of a hypothetical with information and assess it. We'll always do so.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Obviously there are those communities that have made that decision, and they have cat prohibitions and that sort of thing in their areas, like in the Tweed and some other high biodiversity areas.

TROY WILKIE: There was an island on the south-east coast of Australia which the Federal Government wanted to try to eradicate cats from. They were going to spend \$3 million or \$4 million; it ended up costing tens of millions. It took a lot longer than they were going to. They got rid of the cats and the rat population surged and ate the birds anyway. So the birds they were trying to save died. If you strongly intervene and radically try to change an environment, it's going to rebalance in different ways. If we had cat containment suddenly introduced in Sydney, I think of the mouse plague, for example.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I was suggesting you'd only do it on the basis of scientific evidence and expertise.

TROY WILKIE: Yes, of course. I know that's your background, so it's obviously where you're coming from. But I think it's important to note for this inquiry's purpose that strong intervention has been tried before in Australia. It has been very expensive and taken a lot longer than they all thought it would at the start. Then it has had really adverse outcomes, including wiping out populations much faster than they already were, because of other species that cats prey on repopulating more quickly. I think evolution, not revolution, in this space is the best way of going about it, both cost effectively and for mitigating all of the different outcomes we're trying to get to, including the environment protection.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Three things: One is thank you very much for your evidence. It's very valuable. Within Australia, who do you think is doing cat management the best? Which State or—

TROY WILKIE: Dr Ma's program is doing it the best, honestly.

GEMMA MA: We've got some really good examples. For example, in Parramatta there has been an outstanding turnaround, as well as in Walgett and Weddin shire. We're doing things really well in those individual councils at the moment and seeing really good impacts.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Are there any other States, or local council areas in other States or Territories, that you're aware of that are also doing a good job?

GEMMA MA: Jacque Rand's work in Queensland has shown some similarly outstanding results. There have been some in Victoria that have tried similar approaches and also seen the effects in individual councils. The evidence is starting to mount up that the targeted desexing approach is one that's effective, and it seems to be reliably consistent. When you implement those programs, they work in a similar way.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: We have some recommendations from Local Government NSW. I was wondering if I could ask you to take on notice having a look at those as they relate to the Companions Animals Act and particular amendments that they're proposing. If you could take that on notice and have a look, we'd welcome your comments on those. If you agree or disagree, what alternatives may you want to propose?

TROY WILKIE: We'd be very happy to, and we strongly welcome this Government's commitment to review that Act holistically. That would be a key part, and there's a great opportunity to do that along with POCTAA at the same time. In this term we could do some tremendous things there.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Thank you for your attendance today. I go to your recommendation 6 about prioritising research on humane methods of feral cat control. Can targeted desexing programs effectively reduce the feral cat population without mandatory containment? And, if so, how?

GEMMA MA: Feral cat populations, so populations of cats that have no relationship or dependence on people—we are talking about cats that are living kilometres out into the bush beyond people's properties. That is the one instance where lethal methods might be appropriate to manage the populations. But if that is going to happen, it should be done with methods that are humane or as humane as possible, and should be done in a way that is appropriately monitored and evaluated so it actually works and it is evidence based.

TROY WILKIE: But also it would be a last step, I think, because if you have got a population being culled in a national park and you have got a town nearby, they are going to have a feed-in and a cross-flow effect. You wouldn't have a town where you are not implementing the sorts of measures we are talking about, like a targeted desexing program, and be running a culling program, because it's going to be a perpetual culling program, which is not what everyone is wanting.

GEMMA MA: It has been really interesting doing these programs out in the regional areas, like in Weddin shire, in Walgett shire—some parts of Shoalhaven as well. It's really clear that cats from those feral populations trickle onto rural properties, they trickle into rural towns, and that is continuous. It happens all the time because the cats are looking for food. You've got this really important interface between those two populations: the feral population and that unowned cat population. You need really vigilant surveillance to monitor for when those cats come. As soon as they come and they are starting to get fed by people, you desex them straightaway. That is where you need the really ready-to-go targeted desexing programs at that interface. That is really important. And on rural properties, getting the landholders engaged and ready to notice the cats to trap them straightaway and get them desexed if they want to keep them around.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Following on from that, how would you propose to balance, say, welfare considerations with environmental concerns where you have got a population of cats, as you described?

GEMMA MA: It is actually quite easy because the same intervention has both outcomes. With these targeted desexing programs, it decreases the cat population density. It is actually decreasing the population of cats, decreasing their environmental impact, and improving their welfare and improving the welfare of the people who care about them. It is a real One Welfare approach.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: With respect to your targeted desexing program, particularly the Keeping Cats Safe at Home program, have you done any work to make an assessment of what proportion of an area's semi-owned or unowned cat populations would need to be sterilised in order to make a tangible dent in the wildlife impacts, accounting for migration or birth rates, given they are prolific breeders?

GEMMA MA: There have been a few modelling studies that have looked at what intervention intensity you need—so how many cats you need to desex in an area. Generally, it is recommended you desex about 70 per cent to 80 per cent of the population in the area to start to control the population. We are noticing that we need to do a much higher intervention intensity in regional areas than we do in urban areas because we have to account for that migration into the population from the bush. We need to desex about 50 cats per 1,000 population out in places like Walgett and Weddin compared to doing one to five cats per 1,000 population in the urban areas. The migration into the area really stuffs up your intervention because it means you have to desex a whole lot more cats and it's less effective.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: What influences the migration into the area?

GEMMA MA: It can be abandonment of new cats, people who abandon an owned cat. It can just be cats moving from one council area to another. I guess those are the main ones, cats moving around, and, in the regional areas, the cats migrating from the feral populations, looking for food, to where people live.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: The great goal is to convert semi-owned cats into owned cats, having had them sterilised. Is there a risk that, if you achieve that goal, which is worthy, then there's less competition over resources, which means you've got more cats coming into an area.

GEMMA MA: Yes, that's right.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: Can you account for those things?

GEMMA MA: Our ultimate goal with these interventions is that we get all the cats off the street, that there are no cats living on the street without someone looking after them, and that every cat is in a safe and a permanent home with someone who's going to take care of them. That's our goal. But the interventions are going to be much more effective if you're doing it across the whole area, so you don't have to deal with that constant migration. Our goal is to ultimately close down those colonies of unowned cats so that there's zero cats in those colonies anymore. But you're right. We need to deal with the colony down the road to make sure it doesn't just fill up again.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: Just one more question from me, Chair, if that's okay. Just as a lay person looking at this, it just strikes me that it's very difficult to legislate using a sledgehammer approach to this issue. I note what you said about all approaches needing to take a sort of human approach to cat management. Are you averse to a less prescriptive approach to local governments, giving them all the levers I suppose that you can apply with respect to cat management but letting local government areas apply those levers that best suit the local populations? I note in your submission you've referenced that the biodiversity impacts can depend on the particular population in a particular area. Some areas, like the Blue Mountains, for example, might require a more stringent approach to cat management than other urban areas. Do you see the value in having a less prescriptive approach with respect to cat management?

TROY WILKIE: I think so long as it's got a lot of checks and balances on the way, because if you suddenly make some things an option for councils to do and that's the end of a conversation about it, it might get used in ways that are not particularly productive, both in terms of cost and in terms of outcome. I think in our planning system there are, I would say, too many checks and balances, but you have to go through certain steps and prove the reason why you want to have a particular uplift, or not have an uplift, or protect heritage—all those sorts of things. We don't have any of those things in place for how councils use animal welfare protections and laws on their people and their animals. If you were to put in a scheme like that, where it is per LGA, you would have to also introduce a lot of rigorous assessment to make sure that it's being used in ways which are genuinely towards the outcomes that you're talking about.

GEMMA MA: I guess what we've seen in the way different councils currently interpret the current legislation is that they interpret it in very different ways. We see that in them just doing nothing, not doing anything on cat management, so we'd like to see them at least consistently be required to accept surrendered cats, for example, because that can make a big difference when you're trying to close down a colony. If there are too many cats, sometimes they need somewhere to go. But at the moment a lot of councils will just say, "Sorry, we don't do cats. Sorry, we don't accept surrenders. No, we don't respond to stray cats." That's a big problem for us at the moment.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: The latitude in and of itself is not the problem. It's just having a degree of oversight to make sure that it's being applied appropriately.

TROY WILKIE: Yes.

The Hon. WES FANG: Just in relation to the Keeping Cats Safe at Home program, how is it currently funded?

GEMMA MA: It's being funded by the New South Wales Government through its Environmental Trust. It was a four-year grant project.

The Hon. WES FANG: Who's doing the analysis on the success of the program? Obviously, Dr Ma, you've produced some papers on that matter. Is it independently verified as well?

GEMMA MA: Part of the grant budget is for an independent external evaluation, which is done by the trust, yes.

The Hon. WES FANG: How has that analysis been undertaken so far? Has there been any development work, changes recommended in relation to the program, or has it just been, effectively, a tick off to say that it's doing a great job?

GEMMA MA: I'm not sure how that process is run. I think it happens after the project. It hasn't happened yet.

The Hon. WES FANG: So there hasn't been any quantitative analysis done of the project as yet?

GEMMA MA: Only our own research.

The Hon. WES FANG: Mr Wilkie, if there was an expansion of the program, run by the RSPCA, what would the RSPCA do in terms of ensuring that the program wasn't beset by some of the issues that the PC No. 4 POCTAA inquiry found in relation to the way that the RSPCA engages with the New South Wales Government?

TROY WILKIE: Any government grant that we get, we will use and acquit on the terms the State Government outlines. There have been rigorous assessments and acquittals for many of the grants that we have spoken about in different inquiries before, as there would be for this and as you would expect for any public funds. We would welcome any government funding and any of the processes and acquittals and requirements that come with that.

The Hon. WES FANG: You'd be aware that inquiry referenced concerns about the way that the RSPCA was expending taxpayers' money. Can you assure us there would not be similar issues if there was an expansion of the Keeping Cats Safe at Home program?

TROY WILKIE: I'm very confident that that money and any future money has been and would be spent with absolute cost effectiveness and to deliver the outcomes.

The Hon. WES FANG: In an earlier answer you noted potential changes to the POCTA Act. Could you outline what you expect those changes might be?

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Fang, is this in relation to cats? It's a very broad question in regard to changes to POCTAA.

The Hon. WES FANG: I appreciate that. I'm just looking to get a broader picture. But noting that we are short of time, I'm happy to ask it at another time. I'm sure I will be on the next POCTAA inquiry as well.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. I'm not sure if any questions were taken on notice. If there were, the secretariat will be in contact with you. Thank you for your time today and for all of your evidence. We really appreciate it.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: It was very valuable. Thank you.

TROY WILKIE: Sorry, Chair, there were some impact reports and research papers we had hoped to table but forgotten until just now. Is it too late to put those four on?

The CHAIR: No, that's fine.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Dr COLIN SALTER, Policy Lead, Wildlife Information, Rescue and Education Service, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I now welcome our next witness. Do you have an opening statement?

COLIN SALTER: WIRES welcomes the opportunity to further contribute to the inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales. WIRES is Australia's largest wildlife rescue organisation. We operate a dedicated wildlife rescue office, assisting wildlife in the community across Australia 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. We provide rescue advice and assistance for around 150,000 animals annually. WIRES supports a welfare-based approach which improves outcomes for wildlife, the welfare for cats and those in the community who care about and for them. As the RSPCA has noted, roaming cats can face significant risks from cars, dogs, disease and getting lost, and those kept safely at home can live up to 10 years longer. In all of the discussions about the impact of cats on wildlife, it's important to note that habitat destruction and fragmentation is the key threatening process for wildlife. These are the leading causes for wildlife requiring rescue and rehabilitation.

Cats are often a convenient distraction from necessary actions to protect our unique and precious wildlife and improve welfare outcomes. We hope that this inquiry will also focus on improving outcomes for wildlife, the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector, and cats in our communities, noting that cats do impact on wildlife, with uncontained house cats and free-roaming cats in urban and peri-urban areas doing the most harm. As has been mentioned earlier in the Committee, we are aware that the impacts in urban and peri-urban areas are 30 to 50 times higher than for cats living in the bush. The impact of cats on wildlife is a relatively small percentage of animals that come into care. That said, it's still an unnecessary burden on the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector and the dedicated volunteers that we have in communities. It's also important to note that the critical contributions of the volunteer wildlife rescue and rehabilitation sector is at an avoided cost to government.

In terms of this inquiry, the opportunities include small changes to legislation that can have significant benefits. These are benefits for our unique and precious wildlife, for the welfare of cats and for those in the community who care about and for them. These changes include supportive and education-based programs focused on outcomes and communities; preventing additional births through indirect and direct financial support and assistance programs—these include subsidised, accessible and mobile desexing services, and trap, desex, adopt or return and support programs—restricting purposeful breeding; and preventing the euthanasia of healthy cats. WIRES looks forward to the Committee making welfare-based recommendations to government, leading to improved outcomes for our unique and precious wildlife, for cats and for those who care about and for them.

The CHAIR: In your opening statement, you talked about a very small number of calls coming through to WIRES in relation to harm caused by cats. Do you have a rough percentage of how many calls that is?

COLIN SALTER: For the Greater Sydney area, we're talking around 3 per cent of calls are related to cats. About half of that is the Sydney metropolitan area, the larger Sydney metro area.

The CHAIR: So it's quite a small percentage in total. In your opening statement, you said that there are much bigger risks to wildlife that we should be focusing on. What are those bigger risks to wildlife that should be a primary focus for government?

COLIN SALTER: As I mentioned, the key threats to wildlife are habitat destruction and fragmentation. Obviously, that encompasses many, many things. Roads bisecting habitat is a clear impact. Connectivity is probably one of the largest threats in New South Wales, and other aspects of disease as a subset of that.

The CHAIR: Would you say that there's a disproportionate focus on cats in relation to wildlife impacts compared to those other impacts, like climate change and habitat destruction?

COLIN SALTER: It would appear so. It's easy to go after something like cats. Technically, it's an easier fix or it's easier to be seen to be fixing it, rather than the larger and more complex problems. Even though cats are a complex problem, climate change and habitat destruction are much larger and more significant, but also complex, problems.

The CHAIR: Your submission talked about WIRES' support for things like wildlife- and welfare-focused trap, desex, adopt or return and support programs. I like that full title to actually explain what it is that we're talking about when you're talking about that continual support of these animals after they've been desexed. For the benefit of the Committee, can you explain how those programs work and why WIRES see that as such a big part of the solution?

COLIN SALTER: The underlying principle of these programs—as I think a lot of people have talked about today—is reducing the number of cats in the community. A key aspect of that is preventing additional births. All desexing programs are about preventing additional births. TDARS programs are all about reducing additional

births, but providing support for those communities as they move towards a zero population. So they're a welfare-based approach about reducing cats in the community.

The CHAIR: Just going into that a little bit further. I know your submission talks about quite a few different ways that we can reduce the number of homeless cats, and reduce the number of cats more broadly. We know from the pound inquiry that there are too many cats, and there are a lot of cats that don't have homes. You argue in your submission about restricting purposeful breeding of cats. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

COLIN SALTER: As we've seen with the example in Victoria—and I know Victoria's been cited for different reasons earlier—they've made changes down there. Purposely bred cats cannot be sold in pet shops. We know that we have a crisis in the number of cats coming into council facilities. What their program has done is to try to reduce the number in those facilities by restricting purposeful breeding until, arguably, there are no more cats in those facilities. As long as there are cats in those facilities, there are cats that need homes, they're the ones that should be rehomed first, rather than creating more cats.

The CHAIR: I think you also mentioned that you supported Victoria's model of converting pet shops into adoption centres. Can you talk about how that will support that homeless cat population more broadly and also help wildlife?

COLIN SALTER: It will help wildlife by reducing the number of cats living in communities and reducing additional births in communities. In terms of, more broadly, improving the outcomes for wildlife but also cats, those ones that are in these facilities, and these high levels of unnecessary euthanasia for treatable and healthy cats, are the ones that are being rehomed through existing facilities rather than creating more cats.

The CHAIR: It sounds like WIRES' position here really is that cats aren't the biggest problem, but there are certainly some problems with the cat situation. Your focus is on the most humane way of actually dealing with that so we can protect both species. Would that be what you would say?

COLIN SALTER: Most people who care about cats also care about wildlife, and vice versa. WIRES has a welfare-focused approach for all animals and we see this as the most welfare-centred approach.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I've asked this of a number of witnesses, so can I ask you, who's doing cat management the best in Australia, in your view?

COLIN SALTER: There are lots of examples, and there are other speakers who've already indicated this. There's a lot of literature on this about what's being done well in Australia and being done well around the world. I know that the RSPCA talked about their example of Keeping Cats Safe at Home, and we have other speakers who talk about some of their programs. That's something that they're much more well versed to speak on than we, so I'm happy to defer to them on that.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Given the central nature of local government, I'm also asking people if they would take on notice the recommendations from Local Government NSW in relation to amendments to the Companion Animals Act. If I could ask you, please, if you would take on notice the recommendations that are made by LGNSW who want to amend the Act, if you would comment on those please, and come back to us on those.

COLIN SALTER: We will do, thank you.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Dr Salter, in your submission you mentioned about welfare-based approaches. Could you elaborate on the success of these in reducing euthanasia rates?

COLIN SALTER: Euthanasia rates are directly linked to increased numbers of cats. If you're having these programs where you're reducing the number of cats or reducing additional births, that will directly have an impact on reducing the rates of euthanasia. We've heard a lot of people talk about equity in the community. Those who can't afford to have their cats desexed, that's where a significant number of additional births are coming from. If those cats end up either abandoned or taken into facilities, given that we know the number of cats already in them and the cost-of-living crisis we are having right now, many of those cats will be euthanised as well. Reducing those additional births will directly reduce the number of cats being potentially put in that situation.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thanks very much for coming along and for your submission. I'm particularly interested in the recommendations around trap, desex, adopt or return and support—the TDARS programs—and the fact that in New South Wales we basically have a legislative issue with allowing that to happen. I know I have spoken to a huge number of people who admit to desexing cats and releasing them back into the community that they were originally part of, in the belief that that is an effective way of managing the population. Can you talk us through the evidence basis for doing it that way?

COLIN SALTER: I'll start a little bit broader, firstly. As you mentioned, there are people who are doing this in the community and then re-releasing cats. Technically, that's illegal under the current legislation. But within that, there can be a level of distrust for authorities. To draw an analogy, in disaster situations we have people putting their lives at risk to rescue wildlife because there's a distrust for the government agencies that they are not doing what they think is necessary. There is a direct parallel there. We see this happening across the board. As the RSPCA has discussed, a high level of desexing within those cat colonies can bring down the population eventually towards zero. For some of these cats, where there's a distrust that if they are given over to a council facility they will be euthanised, people won't hand them over to a facility because they might not be rehomed, so they prefer to have them living out their life in the community, but they're not contributing to those additional births. That's where that population reduction comes from.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Are there other States in Australia that allow that release, or is it just New South Wales?

COLIN SALTER: I'd have to take that one on notice.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: You mentioned that this was something that Alex Greenwich tried to change back in 2014. At that time, what were the objections to it? Have we got more evidence now that could back it up? What has changed since then, in the past 10 years?

COLIN SALTER: A lot more research has come out to talk about the effectiveness of these programs, but in terms of why the bill didn't get up, we'd have to ask Mr Greenwich. I'm sure members of your party were around at the time as well, to know what some of those discussions were.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Just on the evidentiary basis for the release programs—the idea that you would desex—from your evidence, I think what you're saying is that people have done that because they want to see the cat live its life and not be euthanised. That's the primary reason people do it. What is the evidence around any claims—I'm not saying that I think you make that claim in your submission, but if there is a claim that that then helps wildlife, what is the evidence for that?

COLIN SALTER: I wouldn't say it helps wildlife.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Yes, I didn't think your submission made that claim, but others do though.

COLIN SALTER: Some people see it as a well-founded distrust that if they surrender that animal, it's going to be euthanised. There is a welfare concern on people, and that's why they don't do that. We try to operate within the realm of realism here. We know people are doing this and they are going to continue to do this, so we need to increase supportive programs to support those people who care about cats in the community and to reduce the impacts of those cats. Over time, desexing reduces the population, which reduces the impacts on wildlife, but it doesn't necessarily have a direct impact on reducing the impacts on wildlife now. The other alternative would be if we open up massive cat shelters for these cats to go into, but we know that's a significant cost. There are a lot of layers to that as well. Whether there would be buy-in for that in the community is a whole other question, too.

The CHAIR: Can I ask a follow-up to that question? The argument in some of the other submissions is that once a cat is desexed, they can't have those litters. This morning we heard from the Cat Protection Society that they could have two or three litters easily within a short space of time, so that is four extra cats, and by desexing that one cat and stopping them from giving birth to 50 other kittens that then become cats, that would potentially impact wildlife because you've got one cat, which would have a fairly minimal to almost no impact on wildlife compared to 50 cats where suddenly we are seeing an impact on wildlife. Does WIRES recognise that benefit to wildlife?

COLIN SALTER: If we go back to the example from before, they talked about 2,000 cats that have been desexed. That's a potential cat population reduction of about 10,000 over that short period of time.

The CHAIR: That's huge.

COLIN SALTER: If we think of these cats already being in the community, you either have people caring for them or not caring for them. If people are caring for them and desexing them, that's reducing those additional births, which is having a significant reduction in the impact on wildlife. That's where we're coming from.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: That's because there's an underlying assumption that the cat will be maintained in the environment. If the cat is taken out of the environment rather than desexed, then you get a genuine impact on wildlife because you've taken the cat out. There's this assumption that if you take that cat out, another one will occupy its space. Therefore, that is the apparent—

COLIN SALTER: We've heard evidence that the movement of cats—if you remove the cats, other cats can move in. Whereas if you maintain and reduce that population over time, potentially there's less cats coming in from other sources, and you're not having those additional births as well.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: So it's about the time scale then? I take my colleague's point that if you put the cat straight back in, then it's able to prey on wildlife. But if there is evidence that, over time, it reduces the population to put them back in desexed, then that's going to have a greater impact on saving wildlife over the long run.

COLIN SALTER: It's not a quick fix. I don't believe anyone believes there's a quick fix, but the whole basis of TDARS programs is you reduce the population over time, ideally towards zero.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: In your submission you go through a number of cat-control approaches. I want to go to your recommendation 2 around encouraging and supporting local governments to develop their own companion animal management plans. Is that consistent with your understanding of what happens in Victoria, where local governments develop their own domestic animal management plans, which contain a range of programs, services and strategies that suit that particular local government area, as well as mechanisms by which they evaluate the success of those programs and strategies? Effectively, I'm asking whether you are supportive of less of a sledgehammer approach and more of a piecemeal approach that allows latitude to local governments to do what they think is best for their areas.

COLIN SALTER: It's best to start with where we want to be. Like, with TDARS, you want to reduce the population towards zero—those sorts of programs. I think we want cat containment. We have to work out how to get there in a way that is equitable and effective. I know others have talked about it. That will require specific variations at the local level. We've heard evidence from the RSPCA about Indigenous communities, working differently in those communities, and having more equity-based focuses in those suburbs. For example, northern beaches—a higher standard of living; there's less cats in the community. Each council will require a different approach and focus. We have to root it in communities. We know in communities where people who have cats who can't afford to desex them will have a different trust of the local government agencies. If those people who work for local government know who those people are and develop a relationship with them that is based on trust, that's a much more effective approach than a one-size-fits-all, "hammer down" approach.

The Hon. BOB NANVA: So, for example, if the Blue Mountains council wanted a domestic animal management plan that had cat containment within that, whereas it didn't suit the Inner West Council because it didn't suit their needs, there should be that flexibility for councils to adopt programs and services that best suit their areas.

COLIN SALTER: This is the challenge for the recommendations that the Committee is going to come up with: Where do you find the balance in having a big-picture idea but working with local councils on what's going to be effective for them, in consultation with their communities? As long as they work with their communities, they can work out appropriate options at that local government level as part of that bigger picture idea of where we want to head towards.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for your time today and for giving evidence. There might have been some questions taken on notice, in which case the secretariat will be in contact with you. If the Committee has further questions, we'll put them on notice to you as well.

(The witness withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

Ms SUSY CENEDESE, Strategy Manager, Environment, Local Government NSW, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales. We now move to our next witnesses. I have one witness online. I believe we might be waiting for another witness, Councillor Turley, to come on as well, but we might start with the witness that we do have. Ms Cenedese, do you have an opening statement that you would like to make to the inquiry?

SUSY CENEDESE: Yes. I will do that on behalf of Councillor Turley, who will join us if she is able. She has had an unexpected occurrence. Thank you, Chair and Committee members, for the opportunity to appear before this inquiry today. I am the strategy manager for the environment team at Local Government NSW, which is the peak body representing New South Wales general purpose councils and local government related entities. Cats are popular pets, with an estimated 1.5 million pet cats in New South Wales bringing companionship and joy to many individuals and households. However, cats, both feral and domestic, are highly skilled predators that kill millions of smaller native mammals, birds, reptiles and invertebrates each year. Roaming cats can also spread disease to other animals and can pose a disease risk to vulnerable community members. Managing our cat population is essential if we are to prevent further native animal extinctions and reduce the impact of cats on both the community and our environment.

From Local Government's perspective, managing our cat population requires a holistic approach that includes statewide and targeted community education programs on responsible pet ownership, a transition to mandatory cat desexing laws to align with other jurisdictions and subsidised desexing programs for cats statewide, amendments to the companion animal legislation to enable local governments to enforce the containment of pet cats in New South Wales plus other amendments to clarify definitions and powers relating to cat management, legislative amendments to legalise trap, neuter, release as an option available for managing cats in certain circumstances, streamlining pet identification and registration into one process, and funding and resources for councils to improve pound facilities and to manage and rehome cats.

Councils are highly supportive of community education and responsible pet ownership programs because they tackle the complex issue of cat management at the source. Education programs that encourage cat desexing and reiterate the importance of keeping cats at home can help prevent unwanted litters and cats straying, which in turn reduces pressure on our wildlife and our pounds. For some time now councils have been calling for amendments to the companion animal legislation to enable them to introduce and enforce cat containment policies should they resolve to do so. To support this work, councils are also seeking a three-year statewide grant program to assist them to implement containment policies and responsible ownership programs to increase desexing, identification and registration of cats. The effectiveness of efforts to manage the cat population in New South Wales will be influenced by the resources aimed at changing community culture and implementing the suite of legislative and on-ground measures that we've outlined. We urge the Government to invest in the people, the systems and the laws needed to address challenges with managing our cat population.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I don't think we've got Councillor Turley yet. If she does come, I will bring her in, but I am afraid you have been thrown in the deep end for the moment. I will start with a couple of questions based on some of the submissions that we have received. One of the concerns is that if the State Government was to change the laws to give councils the options to implement mandatory cat containment, there could then be pressure campaigns on councils and on councillors to actually enact those cat containment policies despite the fact that, possibly, there has not really been an understanding of how expensive they are going to be and how much that is going to increase cat euthanasia and the problems that we are already seeing with overrun council pounds. How do we overcome these problems? Does Local Government NSW have concerns that councils could be pressured to bring in these cat containment policies while they do not have the funding, the resources and the ability to actually uphold them?

SUSY CENEDESE: That is certainly a consideration. As we have attested before, councils are all different. Some do have capacity to do cat containment earlier than others, and that's why we promote a voluntary—that councils be able to introduce these policies as they see is appropriate in their LGA, factoring in things like resourcing. I guess the other point I would like to make is that we're not talking about cat containment and cat containment only. We do see this as a suite of measures that councils and the community more widely—as in government and owners et cetera—can draw on, with desexing being a critical component to actually reduce the cat population, to start with. But that also comes hand in hand with the education and cat containment. It may be a case of a long transition period where cat containment is known as the endgame, if you like, or the thing that we're trying to get to, where desexing and the education bring people along, knowing that, at the end of the day, what we're trying to get to is that cats are contained, and they're kept at home, safe and happy.

The CHAIR: It's interesting. From every submission that I've read and every witness we've heard from, there's this real unanimous agreement around education and desexing, and then the contentious part where people are split is around these punitive cat containment laws. You mentioned that some councils are resourced and may be ready to introduce these. I'm wondering if you can give any information about which councils they are and whether they have the capacity on a pound level.

I recently chaired an inquiry into the pound crisis. What we heard was that across the entire State every pound was way beyond capacity, that they were desperately struggling and that some of these pounds were relying on volunteers for food or for bedding. Most of them weren't vaccinating or desexing. Some of the ones that were better resourced were able to do those very basics, but we couldn't find any pound that said, "We've got plenty of room for cat containment laws." Obviously, when you think about it on a practical level, once a cat containment policy or law comes in, any roaming cat then needs to be collected by the council and then, I guess, taken to a council pound. I'm just wondering which one of these pounds are resourced and ready to go, to be able to actually take all those cats in, because that doesn't marry with what we've heard in the pound inquiry.

SUSY CENEDESE: In terms of the council—well, pound capacity, that is the experience that I've heard as well. The information from councils is that they are very much stretched and don't necessarily have that capacity to take additional cats at the moment. What I would say, though, is that the ability to introduce cat containment can be provided or enabled, if you like, but not commenced for some time. Again, it's that messaging that says, as a community, we expect owners to keep their cats at home and to contain them as best they can, and we're using these other measures to get to that point. I mean, councils would need additional resources to support that cat containment implementation.

The CHAIR: The RSPCA talked about their education program, and they talked about how effective it has actually been, just education alone. Their summary from their report that they put out was that, actually, once you put in punitive regulations, they found no effect of—"no measurable reduction" was what was actually in their report. Do you think that, given we're probably not ready for containment laws—I think you said that they can't really be commenced now—should we be focused more on that desexing and that education and then, as the RSPCA mentioned, review that in two years to try to make sure that councils are resourced and able before we enable those laws and essentially threaten communities, and whether maybe we need to still focus on the parts that aren't in place yet? Sorry, I don't know if that was a very clear question. There's a lot of sorts of parts to it, but I hope that made sense.

SUSY CENEDESE: I think, as I said, the emphasis would be on having that power there. As others have said as well, it's a very complex issue. Sometimes it's hard to know what element is impacting on what. So even though the Keeping Cats Safe at Home program is doing great work, it hasn't yet really been evaluated. It hasn't really had that period of time, necessarily, to understand what impact it's had versus other measures that might have been in play. So I think that it's important, as I said, to communicate to the community that cat containment is something that we want to get to. If councils do have the capacity, for whatever reason, to implement that sooner than later, then we would certainly advocate for that and for that capacity or that facility to be available now. But that may be, as I said, a transitional thing where there are other councils that might take a bit longer to implement it.

The CHAIR: The other thing we heard this morning was that punitive cat containment policies can further disadvantage already disadvantaged communities. I know the RSPCA mentioned particular communities. We talked about the rental population, for example. We've just passed rental laws that allow a landlord to insist an animal can be kept outside, and there is a question of how that would then conflict with local government laws. The RSPCA said that containment laws would severely disadvantage First Nations communities. What sort of considerations has Local Government NSW put into their position on that and potential disadvantages to certain communities?

SUSY CENEDESE: Again, the focus needs to be on the outcome that we're seeking. It's not about councils wanting a law to enforce. It's about communicating the expectation to our community to say, "Where you can, you need to bring your animal inside or have it in an enclosure," recognising that there are community cats out there. That's where the desexing is the primary tool that you would be aiming at. As we've seen, even in other States, it is something that needs to be transitioned. It's not about being punitive; it's about saying, "This is our expectation. We want to see the community or pet owners moving towards that as part of their responsible pet ownership."

The CHAIR: Do you think that can be achieved through education alone, given that most of the research that I'm reading in the submissions is that, where cat containment has been put in place, it hasn't actually been effective. It hasn't actually reduced the number of calls about free-roaming cats, for example, or complaints.

Everything sort of seems to be remaining the same. I'm just wondering if that's needed, or whether the focus really should be on education, desexing and some of these other aspects that you're talking about.

SUSY CENEDESE: I think that the other aspects are highly important. I don't think you can have cat containment without those other things. But the ability to, I guess, enforce cat containment will be very important where you've done the education, you've done the desexing and councils may need another tool, essentially, to say, "Okay, we've gone through this process. This cat's not been contained." Because these cats potentially would be cats that might be contributing to another colony or to the feral cat population.

The CHAIR: I'm wondering if we need this tool, if it is shown that it's not effective. There's the other side of it where everything that I have read so far says that there's no evidence that it's effective or that it's achieving any change. Are we putting something on councils that's going to cost a lot of money, and potentially then putting it on ratepayers or taxpayers to fund something, when other organisations are saying it's not even effective? So I've got two last questions for you. Can you point me to any evidence that it is effective? And if we don't have any evidence that it's effective, why would we put that strategy forward, potentially creating a sense for the community that they have to pay for this? Because there's going to be a significant increase, obviously, to councils or the State Government to run it. Why we would ask taxpayers to fund a program like this if there's no evidence that it will achieve what it is set out to achieve?

SUSY CENEDESE: I would have to take that on notice, in terms of evidence of cat containment on its own making the change that you talked about. I think it's important to remember to look at the whole picture. It depends on what other aspects were in play when cat containment has been introduced—or weren't in play, for that matter. I agree that we need to be aware of the implications for councils and others of introducing these measures. Having said that, we're seeking for councils to have the ability to introduce cat containment, not for it to be mandated. Until it is introduced, there are essentially no costs to the consumers or to councils.

The CHAIR: There's no cost while there's no mandatory cat containment?

SUSY CENEDESE: If it's not introduced at the LGA level, then it's a provision that's available for councils to implement. If it's not being implemented at that point in time, then, ostensibly, there's little to no cost. I can't see where there would be a cost involved.

The CHAIR: Sorry, I only meant there would be a cost if cat containment was actually implemented, just to clarify that.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: You make a number of recommendations in relation to amendments required for the Companion Animals Act. In the time we have, could you talk to one of those? That's your very first one about the definition of a cat being owned, in terms of colony cats, and what problems may arise when discussing desexing and registering colony cats. Can you talk to that, about the problems, how they might be overcome and what the definition may need to change to?

SUSY CENEDESE: As I understand it, the challenge with colony cats and identifying an owner is that that owner then takes responsibility for that animal. For regulatory and follow-up purposes, councils are looking for cats to be identified to a particular person or legal entity, at the end of the day. Being clear about how that works is what councils are seeking.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Do you have any suggestions about what the amendment might look like? Please feel free to take this on notice. My experience from talking to rangers over a whole range of issues, particularly to do with motor vehicles and things, is that we can move really good legislation and then they get caught up in the most pedantic little issue that stops them from actually doing what we're asking them to do. That's why it would seem to me that these types of issues may need to be clarified really carefully. Please feel free to take it on notice and come back to us with—I'm looking for some specifics about what you would change it to.

SUSY CENEDESE: Yes, I will take that one on notice.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I feel that we all agree on what the problem is. We all agree that there needs to be some form of cat containment. However, there's disagreement over how we get there. What I would prefer to see is a broad plan set in place by the State Government, with powers given to local councils to implement that and to make exceptions and all of the things that they need to do. The benefit of having that statewide plan is that we get the education program and consistent rules across the State. Does LGNSW's position fall within that sort of broader plan, or do you see it as being inconsistent with it?

SUSY CENEDESE: We support the statewide community education program, and certainly mandatory desexing. I think if there was a statewide cat containment—I don't think we have a formal position on whether there should be a statewide and a local, but certainly the option to introduce it at the local level is something that we do advocate for. We have had that message from councils. I think it would be potentially a little bit difficult

to have—you could have the messaging at the statewide level around cat containment, but I'm not quite sure how it would work necessarily in a legal sense if you had a statewide and a local application.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: For example, you could say that all newly acquired or newly homed cats, or cats under a certain age—whatever you want to call it—have to be kept at home, say, 24 hours a day, whereas for an older cat, you could have a night-time curfew in place. Say that was the statewide rule, but then how it was implemented by each council and what exemptions were made and how it got enforced was left at the council level. That's the sort of thing that we're talking about, if that's helpful.

SUSY CENEDESE: I think that would probably be quite difficult to implement on the ground. One, a lot of cats aren't actually even registered and identified, so we don't really know—if a was cat picked up, knowing its age would be quite difficult to do or to determine. I think the concept of transitioning—or I think earlier you talked about grandfathering—could be a useful one. I think it might just be a bit difficult based on the cat's age or something like that.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Sure, but in terms of the overall curfew rule applying statewide so that the education piece can be there, so everybody knows what their obligations are regardless of which LGA they're in, but then the actual implementation and enforcement and the way that each council decides to put it in place could still differ. I think there's a concern about having different local councils with different curfew rules. Cats don't know where the LGA boundary is, and people might get confused with the messaging.

SUSY CENEDESE: Yes, that is a challenge, most certainly—obviously, cats not knowing the boundaries, sometimes people not knowing the boundaries either. I guess another challenge could be—I think Ms Hurst referred to it earlier—the pressure on councils. If council A has implemented containment and council B has not yet, that either puts pressure on councils or that view of inequality could arise. I think it's something that needs to be carefully considered.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You mentioned mandatory desexing programs. What would LGNSW propose for such a large-scale desexing program, and how long would you propose that that be funded for?

SUSY CENEDESE: I don't have a specific figure in mind. I think our submission talked about in the order of a \$9 million or \$10 million grant program over three to four years, but that also includes the education piece and some of the other aspects around registration and identification. I think that would be a start but, again, as I heard this morning, the costs of desexing can add up quite quickly and so it's about targeting any funds towards that. There are obviously funds that arise through the registration process of animals, but they're already far below what's needed to do the job that that money's due to go towards. It would certainly warrant an additional funding injection from the New South Wales Government, yes.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you so much for your time today. That wraps up our time with you. I believe that there were some questions taken on notice. The Committee secretariat will be in contact with you about that. There may be some further questions as well from the Committee. Thank you again for your evidence today.

(The witness withdrew.)

Ms MICHELLE GRAYSON, Cat Representative, Animal Care Australia, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

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

Dr JACQUIE RAND, Emeritus Professor, Companion Animal Health, University of Queensland, and Executive Director and Chief Scientist, Australian Pet Welfare Foundation, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I now welcome our next witnesses and thank them for their time to give evidence today. We've got two witnesses in the room and one online. I will now go to opening statements. I will check whether Animal Care Australia has a short opening statement they would like to make?

MICHELLE GRAYSON: Good afternoon. Chair, I ask that this statement be tabled. Karri has copies to be handed out in the room. 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 animals in our care. Animal Care Australia questions the appropriateness of the title of this inquiry. We believe that the focus of this inquiry is not about cat management; it is about the responsible ownership of cats in New South Wales, whether that ownership be by pet cat owners or by Government of its policies, including responsible funding and not the cheapest funding. By necessity, this must include responsible data collection and reporting and, most importantly, responsible education of the communities where the varying sets of cats exist but have different needs, and how those different sets should be responsibly owned.

All of the community cats, working cats and the stray cats, or the humane removal of feral cats—we need to define what exactly we are trying to manage. The simple answer is that there is not one definition; accordingly, there is not one answer. Animal care is animal welfare, and we must all own that. What we don't need to do is bundle all cats into the same basket. They each require different approaches with different policies, all aimed at interconnecting the one goal: to do more to protect the welfare outcomes of all cats. In doing so, we will not only protect the cats but native wildlife and other animals as well. They all deserve that. We would like to thank the Chair and the Committee for inviting us to appear today, and welcome your questions.

JACQUIE RAND: Thank you very much for inviting me here. Over the past 17 years I've been researching urban animal management and I have published 32 peer-reviewed articles, many of those related to management of cats in our cities, towns and around farm buildings. As you're aware, approximately one-third of cats entering shelters and pounds across New South Wales are euthanised every year, with the worst quartile of pounds that receive more than 50 cats a year killing 67 to 100 per cent of them. However, euthanasia rates of 2 to 3 per cent are achievable if strategies are implemented that align with a One Welfare approach to optimise the wellbeing of animals, humans and the environment. This will require a collaborative approach from State and local governments, welfare agencies, rescue groups and the community, driven by significant State government funding, with contributions from many organisations.

Just remember, killing healthy cats and kittens in shelters and pounds has a devastating effect on the mental health of veterinarians and staff involved, and we've now published a paper from New South Wales that shows that community members who care for cats that are later killed have evidence of post-traumatic stress a year later. We all want the same thing: fewer free-roaming cats causing nuisance complaints and predated wildlife. We need to be approaching it from a One Welfare perspective and understand the cause of the problem and, therefore, effective solutions. It's going to cost money, but eventually we should be able to get the free-roaming cat problem largely resolved, if there is a will.

However, if your goal is to increase cat-related complaints to local governments, increase cat impoundments, increase the number of healthy cats and kittens killed in pounds and shelters, increase the costs to pounds and shelters, increase exposure of staff to the mental health damage of killing cats and kittens, and have no benefit in protecting wildlife, then, based on scientific evidence, I recommend you implement mandated 24-hour cat containment. While it seems logical and compelling that mandated containment would reduce the number of free-roaming cats and associated issues, this assumption is not supported by evidence. So why isn't it effective? It's not effective because most free-roaming cats are strays, with no owner to contain them. This is supported by your return-to-owner rates for cats in shelters—approximately 3 per cent. So approximately 97 per cent are not returned to owners.

Most are stray cats fed by compassionate people who do not perceive themselves to be the owner. Most are not desexed or microchipped. Even for cats with an owner, containment is often not achievable due to property limitations—we've heard today about renters who cannot take the cat inside—and lack of financial resources. Remember, over three-quarters of a million households in New South Wales, averaging 2.5 people, live on less than \$800 a week. Many live in rental properties with poor fencing, no air conditioning and often no screens on

windows and doors. How do they afford \$700 to \$2,000 for a cat containment system? Mandated cat containment criminalises cat ownership for low-income residents.

Yarra Ranges in Victoria implemented mandated 24/7 containment. Three years later, impoundments were still 68 per cent higher than baseline. Casey implemented it, and impoundments were still higher than the population growth 20 years later. But there are things you can do to decrease complaints, impoundments, costs and the killing of healthy cats and kittens and protect wildlife. There is now good evidence that high-intensity, free cat desexing, microchipping and registration programs that are targeted to suburbs with high cat-related complaints or impoundments work.

You've heard about the successful RSPCA programs, and there is now data from both Victoria and Queensland published in peer-reviewed literature documenting similar rapid changes. For example, in Banyule, Victoria they decreased impoundments by 66 per cent, numbers killed by 82 per cent and cat-related complaints by 36 per cent. We have just now published a paper showing a 60 per cent decrease in cat intake, 85 per cent reduction in euthanasia, 39 per cent decrease in complaints and, based on camera trap data that we haven't published yet, we're showing a significant decrease in free-roaming cats.

Dr Gemma Ma reported that 65 per cent of cat owners in New South Wales contain their cats 24/7 and 28 per cent do so at night. Therefore, 93 per cent are contained some of the time. Based on this, spending large sums of money on broad-scale education will have minimal return on your investment. It needs to be targeted and help those people who most need help. Cats can be, in most cases, successfully contained at night if you tell people about bedtime feeding. It costs nothing. You feed the cat before you go to bed and close the windows and doors. If you care about wildlife, stop kittens being born, through targeted cat desexing programs, and engage your citizen scientists to provide data on native wildlife in New South Wales. Where there are threatened species identified, implement micro-targeted strategies to protect them—for example, exclusion fencing and assisting cat owners with building fences.

In summary, for New South Wales to implement effective domestic cat management that improves the wellbeing of animals, people and their environments and protects wildlife, key policies and strategies need to be implemented. Our recommended strategies are to implement evidence-based legal definitions of cats, as recommended by the RSPCA; support high-intensity desexing and microchipping initiatives, targeted to areas with the highest cat-related calls to councils or impoundments, to stop kittens being born; reduce obstacles to adoption by removing cat registration, permits for excess cats and breeder permits and encourage people caring for cats to take ownership; and shift to a One Welfare approach to cat management which benefits human and animal welfare and the environment by encouraging a "pets for life" approach, helping people keep their cats and offering practical advice on containment, like bedtime feeding, instead of implementing restrictive and discriminatory mandatory measures. Where necessary, use anti-nuisance and animal welfare legislation to reduce issues rather than compliance-driven methods for cat management, such as mandated containment.

The CHAIR: I might start with Dr Rand. What happened in other States, such as Victoria, where cat containment laws had been introduced by certain councils? Have you had a look at the effect there?

JACQUIE RAND: As I mentioned in my address, as far as I'm aware, there is no published paper in peer-reviewed literature which actually documents it works. The data we're getting from numerous sites says that it increases complaints because people now have an expectation not to see a wandering cat. They call up the council and say, "There's a wandering cat." The council is then expected to provide some sort of support for that. In Victoria and in Queensland, it's typically hiring out a trap cage so more cats are impounded. The more cats you take in, the more you kill. We're not killing enough to reduce the cat population. We have published that we're killing about 7 to 9 per cent of the free-roaming cat population. Modelling research shows you have to kill 40 to 60 per cent every six months. It's so expensive, and who's going to do the killing? That's why we're not getting control with the typical management that we've been doing for the last three decades.

KARRI NADAZDY: The other thing that's a problem in Victoria is that they've introduced statewide animal-keeping caps. You're not allowed to keep more than two cats, so what's the incentive to register your extra cats? You're not allowed to have them. Then when they get impounded, you're afraid to go collect your cat because you're going to be fined. They might come check how many other cats you have. So the Government's actually set up a disincentive for pet ownership. It's a disincentive for responsible pet ownership, and it just kills more cats unnecessarily. It's not even about the containment. It's that there are these statewide policies that are anti pet-keeping, and that is the problem.

The CHAIR: Yes, I don't like the sound of those at all. Dr Rand, we talked about Victoria, but I also understand many states in the United States tried to introduce cat containment but then have repealed those laws. Can you tell us why they ended up repealing cat containment laws?

JACQUIE RAND: That is correct. They're called leash laws in North America. They recognise that most of the free-roaming cats are not identified. There's no-one they can prosecute, so it just is not an effective solution in reducing free-roaming cats.

The CHAIR: There's been an argument put up today saying, "Let's just let councils decide if they want to do these anyway" rather than the State saying, "No, councils can't do this." Do you think that, as part of this Committee and as the State representatives, we really do need to consider the impact where councils do potentially put cat containment laws in—who that will affect, and how it will affect them—before we open up for a free-for-all and say, "Well, if you want to do it, it's up to you"?

JACQUIE RAND: Absolutely. It's based on a lack of understanding of the causes. Also, typically, when they bring a mandate in like that, local governments have a simple survey of residents—do you support it, do you not—without informing them about underlying causes. So where many councils in New South Wales don't actively do cat management, if they bring it in, who's going to take the cats? The RSPCA now takes far more than their share of cats. The more cats you take in, the more you kill, because they just do not have the resources. It is just going to lead to more cats coming in. Councils, where they are doing their own work, it's going to increase the number that are coming in and that they're going to have to kill. Remember, there is a shortage of veterinarians. Veterinarians, in most cases, are the ones that kill them. I've seen so many people's lives damaged by having to kill a never-ending stream of kittens and cats. That was a shelter veterinarian.

The CHAIR: You've gone into my next question there. I want to open it up to all of you, as we do have a vet shortage in New South Wales. In fact, we just did an inquiry into the veterinary shortage and the impacts of that. As you say, the evidence is that where cat containment laws have come in, euthanasia has spiked. One other issue that we have in New South Wales is that a lot of these council pounds don't have access to any vets, so they have to find other methods to kill these animals such as shooting them. What does that mean for the pounds and what does that also mean for the people that are tasked with killing those animals? I know we heard from the AVA in the veterinary shortage inquiry that it was a major stressor and that vets have one of the highest suicide rates of any profession. What flow-on impacts would these laws have, particularly in rural and regional areas that don't even have access to vets?

JACQUIE RAND: Often it's the veterinary practice in a small country town that is tasked with killing them. I know it causes a lot of tension within staff, and they have lost staff when they have been doing council work. They are getting in more cats than they can rehome. Remember, a lot of small rural areas are lower socioeconomic. They are less well serviced by veterinarians, and it's devastating. Can you imagine if you get a healthy litter of kittens but there is no way you can rehome them and you are asked to euthanise them? It's that moral conflict about why you became a veterinarian and what you're asked to do. But there are solutions, and we do need a lot more capacity for desexing. One of the things that has been shown to improve the resilience of veterinarians is for them to graduate with really good day-one skills, particularly surgery skills, so you have the opportunity to fund high-volume desexing training at your universities.

There's a new campus at Southern Cross University in Lismore that's being built. Their mandate is to develop more resilient students with day-one skills. Training them in these high-volume techniques where they can desex 50 cats in a day is what's needed. Then they will have the skills that will make them more resilient, because if you can do that sort of surgery then you can cope with lots of other surgeries. I would really urge you to fund those initiatives as well. It's a multi-pronged approach. No one thing in any one area is going to work. It's the whole collaboration with veterinarians, local government, rescue groups, welfare agencies and the State Government.

KARRI NADAZDY: Can I add to that? We agree with what Dr Rand is saying. We really need to reassess how we are funding all of these different programs. I just found out my council is involved in the RSPCA program that you were talking about this morning, the Keeping Cats Safe at Home program. I'm involved in this space and I didn't know. There was no outreach; there were no emails sent. All it is is a page on a website that says, "Here is a pretty downloadable PDF from the RSPCA and here is a video that you can watch." That is the resource. That is what you spent \$2.5 million on. These programs have got to meet the community. If you want the community to be involved, and especially if you want stray cat owners and community cat owners to be involved, you have to not wait for them to come to you; you have to go out to them.

If I didn't look on the website, I wouldn't have even known—and I'm in this space, so I should know. So when we are funding \$2.5 million for some marketing and saying, "This is really successful because we are educating the public," this information is already out there; we need to get the information to the people who need it. People who are looking after community cats are often scared to take the cats to the vet because then they are forced to microchip them, but if they live in apartments they are not allowed to take the cat home, so they can't

take responsibility for the pet. The laws we have made it harder for them to be good, responsible pet owners. We have to make it easier, and we need to get that funding to outreach and reach the communities.

Like you were saying earlier around how do we get these cats desexed when people are interfering with traps, you have to communicate with them. It's not hard. It doesn't cost \$2.5 million—it just doesn't. It's really cheap and it's really easy. The people in the communities know who the people are. It's just doing that community outreach and saying, "We're going to help you with the cats. We're going to vet check your cats. We're going to get them desexed." They would be overjoyed. We need to invest these funds once, do it properly and set up the systems. We've got 20 years of neglect of these animals to reverse. It's going to be an investment. You can't help that.

JACQUIE RAND: I absolutely endorse that. We are working with boots on the ground in the community and some of the most problematic sites are those overwhelmed people. They can't afford internet. They mightn't even have a mobile phone. They don't have a car. They can't afford desexing. I have to say, the registration costs in New South Wales are a barrier. I'm not sure whether you're aware that lifetime registration costs \$69. If you register the cat and it was not desexed at four months of age, you have to pay \$96, even if you didn't acquire the cat before four months of age. Just get rid of those barriers. Excess cat permits as well—use your nuisance laws and your welfare laws to address where the problem areas are, but just make it easier for people to adopt those semi-owned cats.

The CHAIR: You talked a bit about desexing, and we've talked a lot about the cost of cat containment. Obviously there's a cost of a big desexing program as well. Can you talk a bit about the cost difference between investing in cat desexing programs versus investing in the enforcement of cat containment? Which is more cost effective and which would be more effective at protecting cats and protecting wildlife in the long run?

JACQUIE RAND: The evidence is that what is effective is highly targeted and microtargeted to the problem areas—free desexing. There's no evidence in a peer-reviewed journal from Australia that supports that mandated containment and enforcement is effective. It just increases costs. It increases killing, and we're not killing enough of them to protect wildlife.

The CHAIR: When you look at the cost effectiveness of cat desexing, because one is ineffective, your argument is saying that there's only one that is effective.

JACQUIE RAND: We have to stop kittens being born. The reality is, if you walk around these suburbs where there's high—maybe 40 per cent, 50 per cent of the people are in rental properties. Walk around and see how many of those properties could contain a cat effectively—even with good containment, cats escape. The research we've just published showed that of people who contained their cats 24/7, 5 per cent of those cats escaped off their property in the last two weeks. Other research shows that 41 per cent of cats that were lost, the owners described as "indoor only". So cats are difficult to contain. You can't compare them with dogs. If you're in a rental property and you've got kids going in and out, none of them have cat-proof fencing. You can have a really nice—one of my colleagues had a \$6,000 cat containment system, and her cat still escaped. That's the reality.

KARRI NADAZDY: We also need to be really careful how we word these things. I heard mention earlier—I think it might've been Ms Higginson—about saying we should have mandatory 24-hour containment. If you legislate that, that means you're no longer allowed to take your cat to the vet because you've removed it from the house.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Sorry, just to correct, I would never have said that.

KARRI NADAZDY: Sorry, it might not have been you.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I don't think anybody here said anything like that.

KARRI NADAZDY: Somebody said the term "24-hour mandatory containment".

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I'm a strong proponent of take your cat out on a lead. It's a wonderful idea. People in my area do it all the time—take their cats out on leads.

KARRI NADAZDY: Absolutely. That's what I want to say, because I heard the term earlier and I wasn't sure who said it.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: No-one meant that.

KARRI NADAZDY: Anyone saying "mandatory containment"—you have to be careful that you're making sure that cats that are on leads can go out on leads. There's no reason they shouldn't be treated like any other pets, or like dogs, and be allowed to go in their community. Especially cats in apartments, just for their own mental health, need to be allowed to go outside and sniff the flowers and things. They should be allowed to do

that on leashes and supervised responsibly with responsible owners. We need to make that easier. Sorry to misquote you.

The CHAIR: We've talked a lot about cats and cat containment. Dr Rand, has your research also looked at the impact of cats on wildlife? We heard from WIRES this morning that only 3 per cent of their calls were around cats. They suggest that there are far bigger impacts on wildlife than cats and that it's been exaggerated. Has your research looked into this? What has it found?

JACQUIE RAND: If you look on the New South Wales wildlife rehabilitation dashboard, you can get the answer to that. I just looked it up. In 2022-23, when they last reported, of species that were threatened/endorsed that needed rescuing, 484 were because of loss of suitable habitat, 310 for car accidents, 109 for collisions with windows, 98 from dog attacks and 37 from cat attacks. I think that probably answers your question.

The CHAIR: Would you agree, then, that the focus on cats has been overblown and that the evidence does not seem to match up, and that should be what we are focused on to protect wildlife?

JACQUIE RAND: The demonising of cats is really distracting for strategies that will protect our wildlife. It is leading to cruelty. As we've heard from WIRES, it is habitat destruction, but it's very good to blame something. Our research shows, actually, when we asked people, "How strongly do you agree or disagree with these statements: I like dogs, I like native birds, I like native animals, and I like cats," approximately 75 per cent agreed or strongly agreed they liked dogs and wildlife, and only 40 per cent liked cats. That's very different from overseas. We've really demonised cats, and if you look at who is destroying wildlife, it's us.

KARRI NADAZDY: We also need to remember that we've had over 10,000 years of us evolving alongside cats. Wherever there are people and wherever there are large cities, there are cats.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Not in this country. It's only 200 years in this country.

KARRI NADAZDY: I mean as humans, not as Australia. They've come with us here. There were cats on the First Fleet. They came with us. We need to accept that this is something that goes along with humans as well. If we remove all of the cats from urban areas, then the Government needs to come up with some sort of massive rodent and cockroach control that's going to replace the work that these cats are doing that we just don't see right now. I am not sure if there is any research on how much they keep rodents and cockroaches under control.

JACQUIE RAND: We are just about to publish a paper, and it will be picked up by *The Conversation*, and it is titled "Feline Farmhands - The Value of Working Cats to Dairy Farmers: A Case for Tax Deductibility". The reality is that we brought cats with us for rodent control because, back 300 years ago, we didn't have rodent baits like we have now. But the dairy farmers are telling us that cats save them thousands of dollars every year in costs for repairing wiring, in the dairy, that the rodents have chewed through. Imagine that you've got 300 dairy cows waiting to be milked and your dairy stops working. You've got to get a technician in from a fairly remote area, it's complex wiring, and it takes time to find it. That is a welfare issue for the cows. The dairy farmers tell us that cats are better than baits. They've got concerns about baits for their children, for their working dogs and for wildlife, and cats work 24/7, so they actually value them. But we need to help farmers get their cat populations under control, and that is going to require State and, potentially, Federal government funding. Then, if they were made tax deductible as working animals after that, they could probably keep it under control—but that is just an aside.

The CHAIR: I have one more question before I throw to others. We have heard a lot and we have got a lot of evidence that—I want to go back a little bit to this whole idea of letting councils do whatever they want. There is a concern that keeps being brought up around the fact that cat containment laws unfairly affect disadvantaged communities. I wanted to get your perspective on how it will affect disadvantaged communities and whether that is another reason why your recommendation would be against allowing councils to simply introduce cat containment laws at any point in time.

JACQUIE RAND: Absolutely. It is just a lack of understanding of the cause of a problem. If you look at where our free-roaming cats are, it is in low socio-economic areas. It is convenient—councils are being pushed to do something, and we have had this demonisation of cats. There is a Federal Government policy of getting a social licence to manage cats, and that is in the threat abatement plan. It is about getting a social licence to effectively use lethal means for feral cats, and mandated containment. Communities are pushing councils to do something because they have heard how devastating cats are on native wildlife, but they are not being told it is actually humans chopping down trees and clear-felling new housing estates. So it seems like the simple solution, "We've done something that a council is doing." But it is. We've heard about three-quarters of a million of New South Wales households living on a low income. How do they afford cat containment? Rental properties don't have adequate fencing. It just criminalises cat ownership for low-income people.

The CHAIR: I've just come across one more question. I realised that this morning a position was put up that pet cats kill 110 animals, or wildlife, a year. Where are these figures coming from? If you disagree with them, can you explain why?

JACQUIE RAND: It was research published—they're theoretical calculations. A lot of it is old data. It was used in a way where it extrapolated the proportion of native species that were killed—which is good—to all pet cats, whether they were contained inside or not. You heard Sarah Legge stating 27 per cent of cats were contained. The recent contemporary evidence doesn't show that from New South Wales, that a lot more are being contained. If you actually look at the population studies, there is not a well conducted population study in Australia that demonstrates a population effect of cats on native animals—so birds or mammals. In fact, there was a nice study from Perth, Western Australia where they looked at postcodes or suburbs that had three different types of cat regulations. In one it was "ecologically friendly"—you couldn't have a cat; another one, the cats had to be inside at night and wear a bell during the day; and the other one, you could do what you liked with your cats.

They had those regulations for more than 10 years, and there was no difference in the mammal species in the adjacent bushland. In fact, in the area that you could do what you liked with the cat, there was more of the antechinus, which is a small mammal that's very susceptible to cat predation, where you could do what you liked, but the vegetation was a bit denser. They concluded there wasn't evidence for cats having a negative effect on the population, but it was habitat quality. There was another study about passerine birds—the same sort of thing. It was no evidence of an association between cats and native wildlife but a strong negative association between housing density, distance from bushland and decreasing size of bushland. So it's us.

KARRI NADAZDY: We definitely need more research. It's hard to say yes, it's correct or no, it's not correct when we don't have the data. We just don't. There are a handful of studies, and it's not sufficient. Going back to what you asked about councils, one of the things we haven't addressed yet is that we're looking at different populations of cats. You have got your feral cats, community cats, stray cats and you have got your owned cats that are mostly contained. Responsible pet owners are already containing their cats anyway. It has pretty much become the societal norm that keep your cats indoors. There's quite a bit of stigma if you don't. It's usually those community cats that are outdoors. So they are different populations of cats and they need different solutions.

They're also in different areas. When you say, "Should councils do what they want?"—yes and no. We need local solutions. They need support to implement local solutions that are appropriate for the populations of cats that are in that area, because one size does not fit all, because they're not "all cats". A feral cat cannot be compared to a Persian sleeping on someone's bed all day. They just need different resources. The other side of it, though, is that you can't give councils whatever they want to do all the time, because then we end up with these pet limits, which some of the councils have already been introducing over the last couple of years where they're copying Victorian legislation and saying, "You can't own more than two cats, and you can't own more than two dogs." There is no reason to have that.

It's adding to the pound problem; it's adding to welfare issues; it's adding to not registering and not microchipping them, because people don't want to get caught having more cats—and they do have more cats than they're supposed to—because councils are bringing this in. They're bringing it in, and they don't tell anybody as well. So then your pets get impounded, and you didn't even know these laws existed, because there's no outreach. We can't let councils just make up any rules they want to.

My council introduced—it didn't end up going through, but they brought in an amendment that they wanted to—any cat that was found on the street that wasn't contained and wasn't microchipped would be immediately euthanised. No waiting period, no going to the pound first—that's what they wanted to introduce. Rightly so, there was a big community backlash. We're in a bush area as well, so there are a lot of strong feelings about cats, but that was excessive. Councils should not have that power. That's just excessive. We need to have some guidelines that are reasonable. We need to actually outline the different communities of cats and what is appropriate to manage those cats and what isn't. Otherwise, councils just go nuts. We have to manage that. Some of them are doing it great and some of them are not.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: My question is hopefully a simple one. Firstly, I wish to say how valuable I think your evidence is. It's based upon evidence, and that is incredibly useful. You have touched on this point already. We have a submission from Local Government NSW. They make a number of recommendations in relation to amendments that they'd like to see to the Companion Animals Act. I wonder if you could please take that on notice and just give us comments back in relation to your views on the recommendations that they are making on behalf of local councils.

JACQUIE RAND: We'd be really happy to do that, yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you very much for your evidence. I'm just curious: I don't think there's any dispute that humans are the problem when it comes to all things, not just wildlife, and that there is a bunch of reasons that wildlife is in massive trouble. Is your evidence that you're disputing the science around the estimation of how many native animals are killed each year by cats?

JACQUIE RAND: Yes. We're working on a paper which will do that. But, in the end, it's about populations. People don't realise that the birds that are the size that would be predated by cats have got a life span of between two and four years. That means, on average, about 30 per cent of the population are turning over every year from a variety of things—disease, old age, predation, flying into cars. Research from both France and the UK—two different publications used two different measures of bird health. They both reported that birds killed by cats were significantly less healthy than those killed by flying into cars or to windows. They concluded that cats actually take out the sick and the injured, predominantly, that are not going to go on to the next breeding season. They're not having—that's one explanation.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: But in Australia, where we have incredibly different biodiversity to France or anywhere in the Northern Hemisphere, would you think that the New South Wales scientific committee final determinations around the key threatening processes on a bunch of threatened and vulnerable species by cats and the Commonwealth scientific committee are not correct; and that cats are actually contributors to extinction and ongoing trajectories of extinction because those species are not sicker but are more vulnerable in the landscape because they just have never had a species like a cat predate on them?

JACQUIE RAND: I'm not disputing that cats have a devastating effect on native wildlife in some areas. They're feral cats. If you look where cats are most devastating and most effective, it's in semi-arid areas and it's mammals, because there is not a lot of vegetation cover. That's what cats are adapted to kill, and they are very, very effective and the numbers are higher. We're talking about cats in urban areas and about cat containment.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: No, sorry, we're talking about all of New South Wales—for example, Tweed or Coffs Harbour, the Northern Tablelands or Wagga.

JACQUIE RAND: Sure.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Or, for example, the Blue Mountains. These are not semi-arid areas, but they are areas where there are experiences of local population problems from cat predation on birds, mammals and reptile species.

JACQUIE RAND: That's why my first recommendation was to get definitions correct. Domestic cats, as recommended by the RSPCA and by what we recommend, are cats that live around where people live and frequent. Therefore, they're a cause of nuisance complaints. Truly feral cats do not live around where people live or frequent. They don't cause nuisance complaints, and they need different, science-based solutions that, in some cases, will be lethal. But for habitat protection and where there's remnant bushland in urban areas that we want to protect, let's consider doing enclosure fencing.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Sorry, on that note, I remember your evidence before. Are you suggesting that we should enclose wildlife—that cats should be free roaming but wildlife shouldn't be?

JACQUIE RAND: No.

KARRI NADAZDY: It's saying that different areas need different protections—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: No. I'm talking—

KARRI NADAZDY: —and you need to be specific about what area you're talking about.

The CHAIR: Order! Can we allow the witnesses to answer the question, please?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I was asking Dr Rand a question. I understand this idea of enclosures, particularly those urban bushland areas, which are reducing more and more every day because of all the human impact. Are you suggesting that enclosing wildlife is the solution and that letting cats free roam should continue?

JACQUIE RAND: I'm suggesting that it needs to be evidence based and microtargeted. What are the species that are susceptible, and are they really threatened endangered? Then they need targeted protection. It may be providing fencing for cat owners. As part of our program, where a person had multiple cats, even after desexing, we knew that we couldn't stop them going next door. We built her a fence. It was \$700. It's not a beautiful fence, but it's effective. It's being really microtargeted.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: That was keeping the cat in?

JACQUIE RAND: Keeping cats in, yes. It's looking at where the problem is. Do you have sugar gliders there? Yes. Where that area is, let everyone know with letterbox drops that there is a family of sugar gliders in this area. Looking at this, 98 per cent were dog attacks and 37 per cent were cat attacks. We also need to be saying, "Keep your dog inside at night." Who has cats that are outside? Can we help you build a containment fence? Or is it more appropriate to build fencing that is dog, cat and fox proof around that area? But every site is different, and it needs targeted, evidence-based solutions. I love wildlife. I don't want the cat next door coming and killing the magpies or butcherbirds that come onto my deck. Yes, people shouldn't have cats on their property if they don't want them. But you can use nuisance laws to target that. You don't need mandated containment. It's really microtargeted solutions. How can we protect that wildlife best that we care about?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Earlier on, I think Professor Legge gave some experienced evidence about Tweed Shire Council. Again, I am familiar with the Tweed, because I know how much work they have done on the education programs. They've got a very active staff around wildlife protection and welfare for cats and dogs and so on. She said that it's their council officers—the education programs have been gangbusters. They're working really well, but they are feeling that they're at that point where, if they just had some containment controls particular to their LGA, that would be really helpful for achieving—as you said, it has to be the outcome that we're focused on. Would you agree that perhaps sometimes—

JACQUIE RAND: I would say go ahead and measure the outcome. You have to realise the research we've done is that people are trying to do the best thing they can.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Always. I agree. That's wherever you look.

JACQUIE RAND: They don't have the resources. They may not have the knowledge. They don't know about bedtime feeding. Let's find out where there are problem areas. They are low socio-economic and they are not on the internet. Go around and say, "This is how you can contain your cat, and the squirrel gliders or bent-wing bats. There's a family here." Show pretty pictures. Help them. Make it easy for them and get them involved, but don't demonise cats across New South Wales and bring in mandated containment, even in a local government area. I would say to try it and make it a research project, but it's not going to work because it fails to understand the cause of the problem. To Tweed, I would say, "Where are the species that you really need to protect? Let's look at it." We are involved in—I don't know whether you want me to—

The CHAIR: Please continue.

JACQUIE RAND: For example, people who don't want cats on their property, you have to work with them. You have to respect that. We put camera traps on there—and we have real-time camera traps. One person said, "I have got all of these cats coming on the property." We took photographs of the cats that were coming on the property—of those individual cats. We put around flyers in a ten-house radius. One person contacted us and said, "That's my cat. I had to move and I left it with someone else because it was an outdoor cat. The landlord wouldn't let me have a cat." We said, "Actually, they can now." She came and got the cat.

She said, "Most of them have gone, but there's one cat still coming." We put up camera traps. There wasn't a black cat sitting in the driveway, which she thought there was. We said, "Actually, we can see the cats coming through one hole in your fence, walking across your property, going through the other hole." She said, "Oh, I will get my fences fixed." I said, "That's great, and let us know if you still have problems because we will continue to work with you. We can put in water deterrents to keep them off your property." It really is a micro-targeted—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: That doesn't fix the wildlife problem, though, does it? I see what you're saying.

JACQUIE RAND: It keeps the cats off—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Off that one property.

JACQUIE RAND: But you then have to work out where those cats are coming from and help people get them get sterilised. Is this cat a problem? Let's face it, in research we're going to be publishing, it is actually not many cats that kill birds. We are using video collars, and the same—there was data published from New Zealand. Yes, the wildlife is different.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Very.

JACQUIE RAND: But birds are birds.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Well, they're not.

JACQUIE RAND: They've actually got more ground-living birds. There was only one bird brought back—and that was already dead before it brought it back—out of what they kill. They killed a lot of the wetas, which are insects that are protected. We need to get better data, but the population effects are not documented.

Yes, cats kill birds. Yes, we want fewer free-roaming cats. We don't want predation. I don't want the birds on my property killed either, but there are solutions. Targeted desexing and micro-target the problem areas, and then look at where wildlife will benefit from cat containment and help those people. If it is appropriate, put containment fencing. We know now that where feral cats are a problem and there are threatened endangered species, one of the most effective solutions is containment fencing and removing all feral pests.

KARRI NADAZDY: And really what you are talking about with the example that you gave is community engagement. If their education programs are going as well as you have said, then they've already got community engagement. Now you just have to get them interested in the local wildlife, and then you need to make the connection between their cats and the local wildlife. Then you get people excited about the project, and you make it a little community thing and get people involved. Then they get their neighbours involved. "We are part of this program." That comes from education, not from mandated containment. You're going to get people that just won't comply and then your whole program falls apart. But if you can get the community engaged and involved and excited about it, that's what education does. That's why education has to come first.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: It has; that's the point with the Tweed.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: My question is to Dr Rand. I was interested in the interaction there. Would that describe your One Welfare approach, what you were just talking about then? Or if it is not that, could you tell me—

JACQUIE RAND: One Welfare is a multifaceted approach. It is looking at how best to protect wildlife, to protect people and to protect animals. They are all interconnected. What we see with these multi-cat—and we don't call them colonies. People who are caring for multiple cats, they want help and they are trying to do the best they can. They are compassionate people. They will continue to feed cats that come in and need food. If you help them, then they say, "I feel so much better. I was worried about it. I didn't know what I was going to do. These cats give me joy when I get up." You've helped them, you've helped the welfare of the cats and you've helped the environment because you've reduced the number of free-roaming cats. It might be building a fence around their property because, again, in Rosewood—the paper we've just published which showed a 60 per cent decrease in intake, 85 per cent in euthanasia and 39 per cent reduction in cat-related complaints—the median individual income is \$636 a week based on the last census. How do you afford desexing of even one cat at a private veterinarian, which can be, for a female cat, between \$300 and \$500 with microchipping? If it's pregnant, it can be up towards \$500. How do you afford cat containment when 40 per cent of the population's in rental properties?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Where's Rosewood? Is that the Rosewood in the Riverina?

JACQUIE RAND: No. It's Ipswich. The City of Ipswich in Queensland. It's a rural country town. We've got a big community cat program. When I talk about community cat programs, it's not just desexing. It's assisting people to keep their cats. Sometimes we have to provide cat food and say to them, "Look, when it's winter, if you can socialise some of these cats, we can help you get them adopted, but here's cat food so you can afford to feed them and feed them properly so they don't have to wander around. Please feed them twice a day." So, they're coming and they're staying around. We've got camera-trap data. I've got a presentation. You can see the cats. We put tracking collars on them. They stay around the food bowl if there's adequate food. Cats are opportunists.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Are you able to provide the Committee with your presentation? Is that something that is available?

JACQUIE RAND: Yes. I'd have to have a look at what's from the Animal Justice Party because I gave a presentation there, but yes. But it really needs explanation. I'd have to record it because lots of the slides are just pictures. But, yes, I'm happy to do that.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I have one other question because you mentioned desexing. What funding structure do you think would be best placed to support the high—

JACQUIE RAND: Intensity?

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Yes, the high-intensity desexing programs, bearing in mind the One Welfare program, which I think I kind of get now. It's a community thing, watching out for things, so the next stage is that.

KARRI NADAZDY: Before you answer that, the One Welfare concept is recognising that humans are part of the environment, the animals are part of the environment and humans interact with the animals and that we're all interconnected, and that our welfare is related to their welfare. If our welfare is good, the environment's welfare is good as well. That's what One Welfare is all about. It's that interconnectedness. How you incorporate it is what Dr Rand is talking about.

JACQUIE RAND: Well said.

KARRI NADAZDY: This is how we're doing it with cats. We've been talking about One Welfare in all of our submissions for the last couple of years.

JACQUIE RAND: Much better said than I can.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Yes, I know, and that's why I just wanted a better understanding. I think someone was saying cats were going through her property and asking what can she do. Fixing holes on either side is part of One Welfare. Even though she's not a cat owner, she's helping.

JACQUIE RAND: It's very much holistic and it's recognising that interconnectedness. If you improve animal welfare, you improve human wellbeing and you'll improve the environment as well. There's not a one thing that fits all in terms of the solution. Getting back to your question about funding, certainly that one-off State Government funding has been very effective, but it needs to be ongoing. Cat management is lifelong, but we will get it under control and the amount of money you have to spend over time will decrease as long as you don't stop. It really is most effective when there's local government involvement and engagement, particularly the animal management officers because they know where the problem cats are. Rather than trapping them and taking them down to the pound, trap them and take them to get desexed and then work with people.

It's about people getting trust for the animal management offices that they're not compliance based. Compliance is needed, but it should be assistive in the first instance and only use compliance when that fails. So, yes, through State Government but contributions from local government and welfare agencies. Rescue groups do a fantastic amount. There is a nice model with the Cat Protection Society, where the rescue roots really helped. Get rid of registration. Make microchipping effective. Send out SMSs every three months saying, "Are your details up to date?" I saw one council in Victoria has a 70 per cent return of cats to owners. It is getting them microchipped and identified. But here in New South Wales your return-to-owner rates are at 3 per cent, and Victoria and Queensland are 7 per cent. People are not microchipping because of the way that they can then be traced to pay registration. If the cat wasn't desexed by four months of age and you have that other huge cost, it's just a barrier.

If you look at the costs of cat management that were reported by the Centre for International Economics, they are about seven to 10 times for local governments than what that revenue is bringing in, and that is not considering the administrative costs. They got rid of registration in Queensland because of the administrative burden and the little amount of money it was bringing in. Make it easy. We want cats microchipped; it works. All the semi-owned cats that remain semi-owned under our very special permit—and when I talk about the semi-owned cats remaining semi-owned, they have a microchip in them. They have actually got my personal mobile phone number on the microchip as a secondary contact detail. But they're really what you would call trap, neuter and return, plus management. They've been cared for by people.

We're also doing shelter, neuter and return—a little bit. I would just like to say, that is lifesaving for people. The shelters are all trying to get the euthanasia rates down. A shy and timid cat comes in and a volunteer or staff members, or both, will work with that cat, try to get its trust, and it's starting to show trust. But after two or three weeks, or four weeks, or however long they can keep it, an assessment is done, "You can't pick it up" or "It gets frightened when a stranger comes in"—and a decision is made to euthanise it. You can imagine, when that person comes into work or the volunteer comes in the next day and the cage is empty—"Oh, the cat was euthanised," or worse, they're asked to take it down to the euthanasia room and maybe even hold it, in a small facility—what that does to their mental health.

What we're able to do is to desex those cats. If they're in good condition, someone is feeding them. So we put them back to where they were found. We've desexed over 3,500 cats now. Of those, only 10 per cent stay semi-owned with a multi-cat carer and then a bit over half a per cent are returned to field. That is lifesaving for the mental health of people. Some of those cats are turning up and we're hearing that it was actually an owned cat but they didn't reclaim it. Most of them are really happy that the cat has come home, it's now desexed, microchipped and it was vaccinated. So, yes, it works and it is lifesaving.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: How do you address concerns about the long-term sustainability of desexing? I think you've answered part of that question before, but is there anything you want to add?

JACQUIE RAND: It's got to be long term. You can never work away from it. Even if you were using lethal means, unless you have those containment enclosures and you kill everything that's inside—and even if a tree falls over it, then you have to manage that—it's lifelong, because cats breed. There are always people moving into areas. I think the average length of tenancy at a site in Queensland—I looked—was 17 months. So you have people moving into those areas that are all low socio-economic as well. Maybe they were feeding a cat but they can't take it to the next property, because they just can't.

Even though landlords can't ban them any longer, if you've got 20 people looking at a rental property and you say that you've got a pet, you're at the bottom. Some of them just can't find an option. They've got the perception—which may or may not be right, depending on the local government—that it'll be killed if they take it to the pound. If they say it's owned, then they have to pay maybe \$100 at a shelter. The shelter may be 20 kilometres away, they don't have a car and they can't take it on public transport. Yes, it's lifelong, but it's recognising where the problem areas are and helping those people do better. They want to do better. They want to do the right thing. That's what they're telling us.

KARRI NADAZDY: You have to look at how much it's going to cost now versus how much it's going to cost in another 10 years if we don't do something now.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: That answers my question.

The CHAIR: I have one very quick question. We have gone over time, so I just want a short answer. It was something that came up that I thought of. You mentioned that in New South Wales, so few cats are registered and microchipped. If local councils brought in cat containment laws, would that potentially see a whole lot of companion cats accidentally killed if they ended up in the pound but weren't microchipped and registered, because the pound wouldn't be able to track down the family of this particular cat and so a lot of companion cats that have a home could be killed?

KARRI NADAZDY: Of course. Also, microchips fail. I've had one of my own cats where we've had to replace a microchip. It was just by chance that we checked that it actually worked. How often on your annual vet visits do you check that the microchip actually works? That's a risk as well. It might not be that the owner has done anything wrong. They're computer chips. They fail. You can't rely on them 100 per cent. That's something we need to look at as well—regular checks that your chips actually work.

JACQUIE RAND: The research shows that cats are 13 times more likely to return home than come home because of a visit to the shelter or pound. People often don't start to look for them because they assume the cat will come home. After the mandatory holding period for an unidentified animal, it can be euthanised. It becomes the property of whatever service provider or council. There is a limited capacity to rehome timid and shy cats. That's why it's so important to engage these semi-owners, help them take ownership and then talk to them about, at least, bedtime feeding. You then move from there and, over time, help them on the steps on the good cat caring behaviour ladder.

KARRI NADAZDY: There's also a disincentive to surrendering cats. People will feel better about abandoning a cat because at least it will live. If you surrender it to a pound, there's no withholding period. They're not looking for an owner, so pounds, the RSPCA and whatnot can euthanise them immediately. You hand the cat over and, by the time you've gone out the door, the cat's gone. Why would you surrender your cat? You're better off dumping it with the local colony. We need to remove those disincentives to make it easier for people to be responsible pet owners.

The CHAIR: We have gone well over time now. Obviously, this was a very important session. Thank you, all of you, for coming today to give evidence. There were some questions taken on notice, which the secretariat will be in contact with you about.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Emeritus Professor HELEN SWARBRICK, President, Campus Cats NSW, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I now welcome our next witness. Would you like to make a short opening statement?

HELEN SWARBRICK: I don't have anything formal, but I thought I might just explain why I'm here. I'm an emeritus professor in optometry at the University of New South Wales, but the reason I'm here is because of my involvement over the last 17 years in an organisation called Campus Cats NSW. We have looked after the free-roaming cats on the campus for 17 years. I'm a scientist and I like to keep track of things, so I've kept data on our cat population over that 17 years. We've been able to demonstrate that our management approach has reduced the population of cats on the campus quite significantly. I first got involved because I became aware that there were a lot of stray, free-roaming cats on the campus and the university was starting to trap and kill them with the help of a pest controller.

We decided that we would offer the university a better approach, which is based on trap, neuter and return principles. We got the university's agreement to give this approach a six-month trial. At that stage there were approximately 90 cats on the campus. We started by doing an audit of the cats on campus. We then started to trap and desex female cats by priority on the campus, and then we released them back onto the campus once they had been desexed. An army of staff, students and community volunteers have fed these cats every day, and we have maintained that approach since then. As I said, we started out with approximately 90 cats on the campus. Today, 17 years later, we have eight cats on the campus. All those cats, apart from one, are desexed, microchipped and registered on the Pet Registry. That's why I'm here today. It's a very focused presentation that I'd like to be involved with, really addressing just one of the terms of reference of this enquiry, which is the benefits and efficacy of large-scale cat desexing programs.

The CHAIR: You said there was a huge reduction. In your submission I think it was a 78 per cent reduction over nine years from desexing. Is that correct?

HELEN SWARBRICK: It was a combination of a number of approaches. Obviously when we first got involved we had a look at the cats on campus. There were some that were pretty sick—very few at that stage, but they were taken to the vet and euthanised. Some of the cats were actually quite friendly. Certainly over time some of these were rehomed. Particularly kittens and young cats were rehomed. But the biggest impact in terms of reduction in numbers was just by stopping cats from reproducing. Over time the reduction in numbers was basically from rehoming, euthanasia and death, and just natural attrition, as you can imagine, over 17 years.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. You note in your submission the legal controversy surrounding trap and neuter programs. There is this real legal grey area, because when you return that animal, they are still being cared for, so they are not abandoned, but it is not clarified in the law. Do you think that having that clarified within legislation would encourage more groups to get involved and do more desexing to reduce the number of homeless cats that we have in this State?

HELEN SWARBRICK: Undoubtedly. I would also say that we are not alone in running what effectively is a trap, neuter and return program. I'm aware of many community groups who, undercover and very discreetly, do apply trap, neuter and return strategies to manage street cats and stray cats in our urban areas. But they are doing it with one eye over their shoulder because of the potential of that being interpreted as abandonment of cats. I think this is a key part of what we have done on the campus and what I'd like to emphasise going forward. If we are going to allow trap, neuter and return approaches, another part of that is the management of the cats once they are returned. On campus, we have done that through daily feeding, monitoring of cats by feeders and re-trapping the cats and taking them to the vet when they get sick—all that sort of thing. It's an ongoing management through the cat's life that's also an important aspect of the trap, neuter and return strategy.

The CHAIR: There might be people listening in or there might be members on the Committee who haven't worked with these groups before. That's quite a typical thing—when there are these sorts of community cat caring programs, locals within the community do volunteer to become involved in those feeding and care programs once the cats are desexed.

HELEN SWARBRICK: If a cat is trapped and it's healthy, someone is already looking after it. So returning it back to where it was trapped means you're returning it to its home, where it has been cared for. You may not be able to identify immediately who that person is, but if a cat is in good health, then clearly somebody is already managing it.

The CHAIR: There has been a lot of talk today about potentially allowing local governments to have cat containment laws. Obviously, if there was a cat containment law where the university campus was, those cats that are being cared for by students and volunteers wouldn't be able to be contained, or they're not currently contained. Essentially, that would mean that those cats would have to be killed, or collected by council and taken to the

pound. What would that mean for the people who are volunteering and are a part of these community cat programs?

HELEN SWARBRICK: Obviously it would have a major negative effect on these people who have got very fond of the cats that they go and feed every day or once a week, or whatever. Many of these cats are not tame enough to happily live in our home environment or in a contained situation. Over time, through being fed every day, to getting to know the people that come and feed them, many of them do tame down. I've seen a cat that we couldn't approach at all—it hissed and ran away—eventually, through becoming more familiar with the feeder, coming up and rubbing around the legs of the feeder as the food was being prepared. Eventually that cat would sit in the garden and allow students to come up and pat that cat, then finally we were able to place that cat in a home. It's not something that happens overnight, but that obviously is an ideal outcome. Many of these cats take a long time—and to just round them up and try to contain them would not be good for the cats themselves. If we think about the One Welfare principle, it would go against the welfare of many of those cats that we look after on the campus.

The CHAIR: One thing we kept hearing today is that people who care about cats also care about wildlife and dogs, and you mentioned the One Welfare process as well. One concern that has been brought up is whether cats are killing wildlife. What I'm also constantly hearing is that when looking at these TNR programs and the communities looking after these cats—you've mentioned several times the volunteers that go and feed the cats. When these community cats and colony cats are being cared for, desexed, taken to the vet and fed, do you think that significantly reduces the impact they would have on wildlife because they are already being fed?

HELEN SWARBRICK: I'm not naive about this. It's quite possible there are cats on the campus that we've returned that then would catch a bird, or particularly catch the rats that live on the campus. They're very good rodent control, in that respect. The bottom line is that wildlife will be safer if there are fewer cats. If we can control the population—and we found a very effective way of doing it—then overall that's going to have less impact on the wildlife. I'd also make the point that the environment in which we're running our program is a university campus. There are buildings everywhere, there are roads, there are parking areas. There's these beautiful—the campus gardeners do a lovely job of planting these very attractive, monoculture-type gardens, which are not really conducive to providing an environment for wildlife. In actual fact, the reason why we don't have potoroos running down the main campus walkway has got nothing to do with the cats; it's got to do with the environment in which these cats live.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I have asked all witnesses today, for various reasons, if they would have a look at the recommendations that were made by Local Government NSW to make amendments to the Companion Animals Act. There were some very specific ones that they have relating to clarifying what entails cat ownership and powers for seizing a cat under section 32. I was wondering if I could get you to take that on notice and to have a look at that as well, and any comments that you have would be much appreciated.

HELEN SWARBRICK: I would be happy to do that, yes.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: When you were talking about the TNR program, what were the key challenges in implementing it and, in that, how did you address them?

HELEN SWARBRICK: The key elements in implementing it were twofold. Firstly, cats are not actually that easy to trap. I am a very good cat trapper now; I have learnt through a lot of experience. But also, as a full-time worker, you don't have the time to be doing that. It's the practicalities of actually trapping the cats, getting them into the vets and bringing them back. The other big challenge that we have had is financial. We are a small charity, and we rely completely on donations. We have been very lucky to identify a couple of local veterinary practices that will give us very good reduced charity rates for desexing but, nevertheless, it has been a big challenge to continue the funding in order to keep the program going.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Just as follow-up, do you think your model or the model of the campus could somehow be scaled in other areas and, if so, what do you think would be required to do that? I understand they would have to have bespoke solutions in different areas, but do you think your model could be a guide?

HELEN SWARBRICK: I think it certainly could be a guide for many areas. And you are absolutely right: One size does not fit all in terms of solutions, but the model that we have developed, I think, has worked so effectively and also, over time, we have been able to maintain, for the past seven or eight years, less than 10 cats on the campus. But I would make a comment here that one of the challenges is always that you can't just do the desexing and walk away. The campus is not an island, and there are a lot of cats that do immigrate onto the campus. Through our model, we have been able to keep track of those immigrant cats. As soon as they get on campus, we either trap them and return them to the owners or we trap them, get them desexed and embrace them

into the campus community. But it takes constant vigilance to do this. It is not something that you could go in and do for two or three years and then walk away, or else you would find that the population would then rise back up due to the immigration problem.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: What kind of birdlife would be on the campus?

HELEN SWARBRICK: Rainbow lorikeets, a lot of Indian mynas, a lot of noisy miners, and a lot of currawongs. In actual fact, the currawongs and the large birds are the ones that really predate on the smaller birds.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Are other societies within the campus monitoring the birdlife?

HELEN SWARBRICK: It is interesting that you ask that because, right at the beginning of our program, we did approach the environmental science and biology schools to see if they would be interested in running a parallel program to try to monitor the impact on the wildlife on the campus. We weren't able to get that one off the ground. I thought it would be a wonderful program for students to run to actually complement what we were doing and provide evidence that we were helping out with the campus wildlife. But I would make the comment that we don't have a lot of wildlife. This is an urban, busy campus.

The CHAIR: I have got a few more questions. All of this work that you are doing is funded through charitable fundraising and volunteering time, which I think you mentioned in an answer to my colleague. Do you believe there should be government funding to manage cat colonies, to do a lot of the desexing and for the rescue organisations as part of our response overall to the overpopulation of cats in New South Wales?

HELEN SWARBRICK: Absolutely, yes. We have struggled to make our funding stretch, but now we're at a point of reasonable success with a low number of cats. Certainly the cat rescue groups and the small cat welfare groups out there in the community are often funding what they do out of their back pockets. They do an enormous amount of work. I know there was a scheme funded by OLG a couple of years ago, which gave a lot of funds to some of those rescue groups, but it's only a limited time. It's not like it can just stop. These sorts of fundings has got to go on. Something similar to the OLG funding regimen would be a wonderful thing, but it needs to be an ongoing type of thing to fund these rescue groups, because it doesn't just stop.

The CHAIR: Do you think that there also needs to be more research into some of these TNR programs? Obviously yours is almost like an accidental research project, where you've been able to actually try to work with this particular colony of cats, but I believe that there's only a little bit of research out there—and obviously yours is another example—that shows that over time you've been able to actually effectively manage the number of cats and significantly reduce the number of cats over a period of time. Do we need more research into this space as well?

HELEN SWARBRICK: It would be lovely to have more research, but I think it's important to recognise that a lot of research has been done overseas, particularly out of the US, Europe and the UK, which shows similar sort of findings to what we've been able to find on the university campus. I think that if we're going to find a way to spend money, it's probably not to throw it at research projects. It's to throw it at subsidised or free desexing programs.

The CHAIR: To steal a question from the Hon. Peter Primrose from earlier today, I think he asked if there was somewhere else in the world that's doing this really well. It sounds like you're saying that overseas they have done these TNR programs, and they are effectively reducing the number of cats through these programs. Can you tell us a little bit more about if you know what countries these are or where you've seen worldwide where these programs have been really effective?

HELEN SWARBRICK: There are a lot of publications out there. It doesn't take a lot of looking through the scientific literature. I know from the States, for example, in one of the large cities, there was a TNR project that ran over something like 15 years and reduced the population from 300 cats to zero. So there's a lot of documentation. Certainly in the States there are some very good results from TNR-type programs. Also, there are a lot of community cat-related programs, where desexing is part of the management approach, from Europe. We all know about the cats of Rome, for example, where the population there has been maintained through, basically, a desexing and community care type of approach. So, yes, there are many examples from overseas.

The CHAIR: Lastly, as a committee, we will make recommendations to the Government in this report. What sort of recommendations would you like to see within that report made by this Committee?

HELEN SWARBRICK: The first is to support the concept of large-scale cat desexing programs and to make those possible through encouragement and also encouraging large-scale, high-volume desexing clinics. There has to be funding, and the funding has to be ongoing. I think the third recommendation that I've made in my submission is that POCTAA needs to be looked at so that its abandonment clause is modified to allow a

situation where cats can be returned in a good, well-run TNR program without people being at risk of prosecution for abandoning cats that in actual fact have been well looked after.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for your evidence and for your time today. I believe that there was a question taken on notice, which the secretariat will be in contact about. The Committee may have further questions as well. That brings us to the end of today. Thank you, everyone.

(The witness withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 15:00.