REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

ANIMAL WELFARE COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

CORRECTED

At Preston Stanley Room, Parliament House, Sydney on Tuesday 1 April 2025

The Committee met at 9:15 am

PRESENT

The Hon. Emma Hurst (Chair)

The Hon. Scott Barrett
The Hon. Susan Carter
Ms Sue Higginson
The Hon. Emily Suvaal
The Hon. Peter Primrose

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

The Hon. Robert Borsak
Ms Abigail Boyd

The CHAIR: Welcome to the second hearing of the Animal Welfare Committee's 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 land 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 those procedures.

Dr JOHN KANOWSKI, Chief Science Officer, Australian Wildlife Conservancy, affirmed and examined

Mr JOEY CLARKE, Senior Science Communicator, Australian Wildlife Conservancy, affirmed and examined

Ms JAANA DIELENBERG, Communication and Engagement Manager, Biodiversity Council, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our first witnesses. Thank you for taking the time to give evidence today. Do either of the witnesses in the room have a short opening statement that you would like to give?

JOHN KANOWSKI: Thank you, Chair. You have our submission. We're here, the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, because feral cats are a primary driver of extinctions in Australia and conservation of Australian wildlife is our mission. We're particularly interested in the terms of the inquiry to do with feral cats. Most Australians simply have no idea of the wildlife in Australia that has been threatened by cats. There are whole groups of species that we or our children would simply not know of: the dasyurids, the bandicoots, the bilbies, the potoroos, the bettongs, the hare-wallabies, the tree climbing native rodents and the little burrowing rodents. They are an important part of our environment and of our country and these animals play important roles in the ecosystem. Feral cats have been the primary driver of the extinction of these species and the threat to many others. Our organisation takes that threat seriously.

One of our major initiatives is to create areas where there aren't any feral cats or foxes or other such introduced predators. We fence out those animals and we reintroduce the native species—the ones that still exist—in islands or particular refuges across the country. We've got 10 of them across the country. We've got three in New South Wales. Two of them are with New South Wales national parks and we've got another three in development. They're very successful. They enable the conservation of threatened mammals in particular. But they're only a pinprick, really, in the scale of the whole country. We also would advocate for more development of more effective means of controlling feral cats humanely outside those fenced areas. We're particularly interested in the development of novel techniques, such as gene drive, which have the potential for continental-scale control in a humane manner. I briefly throw to my colleague Joey Clarke, who has been to one of these areas very recently, just to talk about what he saw.

JOEY CLARKE: One of the fenced safe havens that we've constructed in partnership with New South Wales national parks is at Mallee Cliffs National Park. That's in the far south-west of the State. I was lucky enough to visit last week. Seeing that project when it started around 2016 or 2017 and going back now almost a decade later, there are eight species of native mammals that have been released there at various stages of becoming established as healthy populations. It was an insight into what the bush should look like. There are supposed to be these very healthy, thriving populations of small native mammals, but the only places that we see that now are in these safe havens where cats and foxes have been removed entirely. For some of these species, they're incredibly vulnerable to predation and they can only persist with zero cats and foxes. That's the lifeline that these safe havens provide for those most vulnerable small native mammals.

The CHAIR: To our witness online, is there a short opening statement from the Biodiversity Council?

JAANA DIELENBERG: Yes, there is, thank you. We welcome this inquiry into managing cat populations in New South Wales, including the examination of pet cat management. As an independent expert group founded by 11 universities to promote evidence-based solutions to Australia's biodiversity issues, we are pleased to be able to assist this inquiry by presenting evidence and recommendations backed by high-quality, peer-reviewed science. Misinformation and misleading pseudoscience on the impacts and effective management options for cats are very prevalent online. Many people promoting this material, potentially even to this Committee, have good intentions but are unaware that their claims are unsubstantiated. This inquiry is timely, as there are now 1.6 million pet cats in New South Wales.

How pet cats are managed is not just the business of cat owners, because every cat allowed to roam has an impact on everyone by diminishing the opportunity of people in the community to experience wildlife, by being a nuisance to neighbours and by spreading cat-borne diseases, which have a $2 billion health impact on New South Wales every year through sickness, hospitalisations, birth defects, miscarriages and time off work. The most effective way to address these issues, reduce wildlife predation and also reduce the flow of pet cats into the feral cat population is for pet owners to desex their pets at four months of age and to keep their cat securely contained to their property. Importantly, this will improve, not reduce, the safety and welfare of pet cats.

Many cat owners are already following these practices, but more investment is needed to make cat containment the norm in New South Wales. The majority of the community would support the change. Recent research by Monash University found that in New South Wales two-thirds of people support requiring cat owners to keep their cat contained to their property and less than one in 10 people oppose it. Even the majority of cat

owners do not oppose it. We recommend that New South Wales law is amended to set a legal expectation for cat owners to contain their cats, and that this is backed by investment in communication, education and enforcement to ensure that the policy can realise its potential.

The CHAIR: I might start with a couple of questions myself, beginning with the Australian Wildlife Conservancy. You mentioned in your opening statement the gene drive technology and you say it offers a potentially safe, humane and effective approach. For the benefit of the Committee, can you explain how this technology works? Does it render the cats infertile? How does it actually stop these cat populations from growing?

JOHN KANOWSKI: I'll do my best. We collaborate with the CSIRO and university researchers on this technology. Essentially, it is manipulating the genetics of cats and then releasing them into the wild such that, when those cats breed with the feral cats, the offspring—perhaps the males or perhaps the females—are infertile and the population dies out. That's how it works. There's no injury to any individual cat. It's just that the population cannot keep breeding.

The CHAIR: That's quite different, then. I know that the CSIRO a long time ago was looking at virus control through baiting systems. Has that research been dropped entirely in favour of this?

JOHN KANOWSKI: Again, I can only speak to my second-hand knowledge of this. I'm not aware that that is being pursued in Australia at the moment. Medical technology, in general, advances very quickly, so it's possible. There still may be solutions in that area. But, to our knowledge, the methodology that I'm aware is being worked on at the moment is this gene drive. It's currently being worked on with house mice, because there's a problem agriculturally, and with wildlife. House mice can be kept in the lab and the biology needs to be understood. The potential application to feral cats is probably 20 years away. We've got to maintain native wildlife populations in the interim.

The CHAIR: You mention in your submission that the current methods have issues with safety and welfare. How do the current methods with safety and welfare problems compare to, say, this gene drive technology? If there was investment into that gene drive technology, could we see a date for that to be useful far sooner than the 20 years?

JOHN KANOWSKI: Yes, there is limited investment in the gene drive. Absolutely, as a State and a national priority, that is an area that, in my opinion, would be of substantial benefit. It's not without risk. For example, you do not want to take gene drive cats and introduce them to where cats are native. You want to have some mechanism that prevents it flowing on into those native populations. The trouble with current methods of cat control—we do use various forms of cat control outside these fenced areas. We work with Aboriginal people who, in the Western Desert, still hunt cats, all the way up to the latest AI informed machines that essentially are a way of poisoning cats, and there's baiting and there's live trapping and shooting as well.

The trouble with all those methods is the difficulty of effectively suppressing cat populations at a landscape level. We've done a number of experiments where we've done shooting at quite substantial scales over extended duration and the cats in the surrounding landscape quickly reinvade the area that had been shot. That's true, more or less, for any control measure, even baiting. I'm not sure of the legislative requirements for that in New South Wales. In Western Australia where we work, where this bait 1080 is essentially the same as what's in one of the native plants, the native animals are very tolerant of it and so it can be used quite effectively without any impacts on native wildlife. Even then, to aerially bait 70,000 hectares is quite an expensive thing, which we do on one property to be able to release some of these threatened animals. We're still getting invasion from outside that 70,000 hectares.

The CHAIR: Can I just clarify, you said that that immunity for native animals was only in certain areas. My understanding is that the research here has shown that there's no immunity for any native animals and, in fact, it's used often to kill native animals, particularly in New South Wales.

JOHN KANOWSKI: Again, I'm aware of some work, I think, in New South Wales where native quolls—the predator—were actually relatively tolerant of 1080 baiting. The net effect of 1080 baiting was positive for the quolls.

The CHAIR: In New South Wales?

JOHN KANOWSKI: In New South Wales. But the reality is that poison P, which is where the 1080 comes from, is much more prevalent in Western Australia. It is occurring in other States, but it's much more prevalent there. The tolerance is much stronger in Western Australian populations of species than in New South Wales.

The CHAIR: I've got a couple of questions for Ms Dielenberg as well, particularly in regards to cat containment. In the last hearing we heard from the RSPCA and they raised some serious concerns around

mandatory cat containment laws. They said that it would create equality issues and disproportionately disadvantage lower socio-economic groups, that it would disadvantage renters and that it would significantly impact on First Nations communities specifically. Do you share those concerns and how do you account for those issues with mandatory cat containment?

JAANA DIELENBERG: We believe that at the point of transition, clearly, for some people, that transition might be harder than others. But we're at a point in our ownership of cats in Australia where we have more than ever before and just as with dogs, we require everyone to keep their dogs securely contained. That is something people have to take into account when they obtain a dog. We don't say that, for dogs, it would be too expensive for you to get a front fence, so you can get a dog anyway, but you can just let it roam down the street. There are many things that we have, once the evidence is there, that this is a societal wide problem or a problem for the environment, we've chosen to implement measures which may have an up-front cost or impact on some members of the community.

That's a key reason why we are strong advocates for investing substantial resources into the introduction of changes that include really effective education and communication programs and also potentially assistance for some communities or people in the community to be able to transition their households to be able to effectively have cats. While some of those measures might be through, say, an introductory pilot period of some years while people have existing cats, because new people are considering getting new cats in the future would know what their expectations are.

There is good reason why some councils managing on an independent level may decide that for some members of their community they would extend those and always offer those, maybe for elderly people or other members of the community who maybe are on lower income they might provide additional services ongoing. We recognise that it does have an impact, but we absolutely think this is something that we need to take action on as a society. Like we have for other issues, we have to find sensitive ways and effective ways to do that.

The CHAIR: You talk about these substantial resources to be able to assist in that. When we've spoken to other States and we've seen some of the evidence come in, many of those councils have actually introduced it and then dropped mandatory cat containment because of the significant increase on that council. At the moment, we've just done an inquiry in New South Wales. At the pound, facilities are overrun. There were some real issues that were raised in the last hearing that we had for this inquiry about how councils would actually afford to pay for it. I know in Victoria, for example, they were looking at having to significantly increase rates for everyone within that council area to be able to afford to do it. Is that something that you see would have to be covered by the State Government for councils who actually elect to do this, given that councils may not necessarily be able to increase their rates to the level that would be needed to be able to afford putting something like this through?

JAANA DIELENBERG: It's a very valid point. A few years ago, I was involved in a large survey of local governments across Australia that indicated that roughly half of more than 100 councils that provided detailed information on their cat management programs only spent in the vicinity of $20,000 a year on cat management, which is clearly inadequate to be able to implement these kinds of programs. But that doesn't mean that the resources cannot or should not be found. I'm aware that in New South Wales, I believe, the State Government has $43 million in a companion animal fund, but only $8 million of that currently flows to local governments.

I think there's also an added role for State and potentially Commonwealth governments because, at the State and Commonwealth level, there are responsibilities for the management of native wildlife and threatened species, and there are a number of threatened species that are being very negatively impacted by pet cats in New South Wales. I can definitely see a role where Commonwealth and State governments choose to step in and provide some of that funding. I believe if you established a kind of fund that allowed councils to access grants for this kind of work, you would see a quite rapid uptake and implementation of these kinds of policies by councils as they can access those resources.

There's also a good reason why the New South Wales Government should feel motivated to increase cat containment and dramatically reduce the number of cats that are on the streets in our suburbs. That is because, at the moment, cat borne diseases—this is the diseases that can only be carried and sustained in the Australian community because of the presence of cats—cost the New South Wales economy $2 billion a year. Nationally, it's $6 billion a year. If we were to dramatically reduce the number of roaming cats in the suburbs and places where people live, we would actually save more money in averted health costs than the programs would cost us.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I go to the witnesses in the room, first. You mentioned native cats before, and where there are native populations. Can you clarify that for me, please?

JOHN KANOWSKI: The native quolls have a—

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So you were talking about native cats being quolls?

JOEY CLARKE: Sorry, I think that was about overseas, with gene drive. On other continents, there are places where cats are native. That's where some of the risk with gene drive comes in.

JOHN KANOWSKI: Thank you, Joey.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Sorry, I missed it when you first started talking about gene drive. So it is purely transferred generationally?

JOHN KANOWSKI: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: How long is it from when the first cats are introduced into a population until you start to shift the needle on that broader landscape?

JOHN KANOWSKI: That's a body of research that has to be done. It depends a lot on the cat breeding systems, and how far cats will travel to mate with each other. We've had some cats with radio collars on them in western New South Wales, out where Joey has recently been, that have travelled 100 kilometres in six weeks. Clearly, if cats are doing that, you need fewer of these genetically manipulated cats to spread the gene to the population. But if cats are largely breeding locally, then you need more. That's an unknown, basically. There are two unknowns to figure out. One is the actual biology of manipulating the animal genetically—that's a whole lot of lab work for people in white coats. And then there's how do you then interface that with the environment? How many cats do you need to do and how often do you need to repeat it et cetera?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Because you are then also relying on those released cats or newly introduced cats to outperform established cats in that population.

JOEY CLARKE: The clever thing with the gene drive is that it—with a normal gene, like we think about eye colour or hair colour or whatever, the standard pattern of inheritance is that you've got a fifty-fifty chance of inheriting either copy of the gene from the mum or the dad. The gene drive part of this technology increases the rate at which the gene is inherited in the offspring. Potentially, you could bump it up so that 99 per cent of offspring inherit the gene that you've modified. By doing that, it's not relying on that natural inheritance; it's a way of manipulating the rate of inheritance of the target gene.

JOHN KANOWSKI: To answer your original question, we don't know the timeline at the moment.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Ms Dielenberg, can you explain for me what cat containment looks like? I'm struggling to picture something other than a fully enclosed cage that would keep a cat in.

JAANA DIELENBERG: I have a cat myself. It's fully contained. It stays 100 per cent within our house and on our balconies. We've got pot plants. We spend time playing with it, so it gets a chance to run around and have its needs and natural urges stimulated through play. For some people, cat containment looks like that. I certainly know people who live in apartments; it looks similar to that—on a balcony, potentially, or just inside an apartment. In other cases, some people build outdoor catios or runs. Sometimes these are attached to the house. Often they look a little bit like an aviary or an extended aviary area. I know someone who has a little bit of an equivalent of a dog door, but it's a cat door, and the cat can pop out into this quite small area of garden.

In some cases—say, when people have townhouses with a courtyard—there are some things you can put on the tops of fences. If you only have a small amount of fence line, it's quite possible to—it's almost a bit like an AWC floppy top fence on one of their conservation reserves. That keeps your cats in. There is a variety of ways that people can do it. I also know people who keep their cat contained, but then they have literally bought a bird aviary that they've set up in a part of their garden with some plants in it, and for a couple of hours a day they go and put the cat out into this.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So it's not overly cost prohibitive?

JAANA DIELENBERG: It's not. In my case, it didn't cost me absolutely anything to be able to keep my cat contained, other than reminding my husband and my children to shut the sliding door—the screen doors. In some cases, if someone has an older style house that doesn't have flyscreens, they might need to invest in flyscreens on their ground floor windows.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: In your research, can you tell us about the awareness of the problem in those urban areas? Everyone sees feral cats as a—what we're hearing here with our native mammals. But how aware are people in urban areas? If you look at the photo behind you, cats would be having an impact on that environment as well. What's the level of awareness of that problem?

JAANA DIELENBERG: The awareness of the issue has definitely been growing, but it's still quite mixed. There are still pockets of the community who have never even thought about it. In that way, I think local

governments play a very important role in educating their community and setting the expectations of what it is to be a responsible pet owner. If, at the moment, your council is not asking you to keep your cat contained, you might think, "It's okay for me to let it roam." Over the last decade we've certainly seen very rapid increase in the amount of support across the whole community for containment measures. It was a project in conjunction with AWC about 15 years ago that I was involved in, when we went on SBS's *Insight* program. No-one in the audience had any awareness about cats having impact on native wildlife. People said ridiculous things, like, "If the cats are eating wildlife, why don't we start aerial dropping cat food across the Australian landscape?"

I do quite a lot of radio interviews on this topic at this point, and the overwhelming number of callers that call in on talkback are people who are very concerned about losing wildlife around them—people who are gutted that maybe they had a beautiful family of blue-tongues living in their front yard, and then someone moved in two doors down with cats, and now they're gone. That's the overwhelming sentiment that we're now getting from the community.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I have a quick question for Dr Kanowski about the gene drive technology. I think you said one of the unknowns was how to do it with the biology of a cat. Has this been done in cats at all?

JOHN KANOWSKI: No.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: And we don't know how long it would take for it to be done in cats?

JOHN KANOWSKI: No. The estimate we've got from the CSIRO is decades.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: So this would be a decades-long solution rather than something we could implement now?

JOHN KANOWSKI: Yes. It's not something to do soon.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Perhaps this is an unknown. If we have cats that are uncontained, are pet cats likely to breed with cats in the community that have the gene drive tech?

JOHN KANOWSKI: That's definitely something to consider, if gene drive was used as a solution. I guess it would be an added incentive to contain your cat. It's got no impact on your pet cat. It just means that the young would have this gene, and so they may be sterile.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: So it would ultimately breed out a lot of house cats, potentially, if they aren't contained?

JOHN KANOWSKI: Breed out the progeny of house cats, yes—all the stray cats.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I have a quick question for the Biodiversity Council. Listening to your description of cat containment, it sounded like training rather than containment. Are you suggesting that people need to train their cats to only go in specific areas?

JAANA DIELENBERG: No. Sorry, I might have not made that very clearly. There's certainly an element of training for the cat owners. In terms of our cat, from when he first came home, we kept him indoors. Now, if we open the doors to go outside, he never tries to run out. He'll often sit and just sort of look at what's going on, and he's quite hesitant around the doorways. He doesn't know any different. I always think it's a bit like if you've never taken your five-year-old down the chocolate aisle at Coles and bought them a chocolate bar, it's very easy to walk past that aisle without having your child harassing you. Whereas, if you occasionally take them down the chocolate aisle or buy them a chocolate bar, then every time you go through Coles, the child wants one. We've had absolutely no issue keeping our cat contained, but it has just been consistent. I think, in some ways, that's the training element with any pet—dogs, especially, as well as cats. Whatever the rule is, when it's consistent, they adapt to it quite quickly.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Yes. You have different five-year-olds than the ones I had.

JAANA DIELENBERG: They're not five anymore

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I won't talk about chocolates and children. I ask all three witnesses, maybe beginning with the AWC: You talk about the establishment of conservation fences and provide details. I note that on page 7 you say that currently on the Australian mainland there are 95 square kilometres of conservation fences. The costings you give are initial capital costs of $50,000 per kilometre for the monitoring and maintenance, and then feral eradication within that of $400,000 for 8,000 hectares. With all those figures, where do you see conservation fencing being most appropriately expanded? Where would it go? What sort of ongoing capital investment would be required? What priority would you give it over all of the other things that you've spoken about? Could you just talk about it a little bit more?

JOHN KANOWSKI: For sure. Ultimately, there are a number of tools in the toolbox. Fences are a highly effective, capital-intensive solution for the most cat and fox vulnerable species. If you want to have those species in the landscape performing their ecological functions and conserving them, you need to have something along the lines of a fence, or in one case we have an entire island. There are alternatives such as aerial baiting in Western Australia that probably cost us $50,000 a year to do the baiting. It's not effective every year, so we can't have the same suite of vulnerable species in that landscape.

In terms of where fences are important, our aim in the Australian Wildlife Conservancy is to have these native animals back in each of the major biomes from where they used to be—so the desert, the forest, the woodlands—because over time, if they're only on a couple of islands off the West Australian coast, their genetic adaptation to these different environments will be lost. We want to maintain the adaptation to the desert, to the forest, so that in 20 or 30 years time—that's our time frame with these fenced areas—we're hoping that gene drive or some other smart technology will come along that will enable the fences to be opened because cats will be effectively controlled.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Where would you see the next round of these fences being promoted within New South Wales?

JOHN KANOWSKI: We have had one in south-west Western Australia for over 20 years. With the New South Wales Government, we built this one at Mallee Cliffs and one in the Pilliga Forest. There's another one right up in the north-west national park. NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service themselves are building four and at the moment we are progressing another three: one just near Queanbeyan, one we're working with Defence on in Orchard Hills near Penrith, and one up in northern New South Wales. New South Wales is a big State and there are none on the New England Tablelands, for example. As I said, we'd be looking to ensure that the species that benefit from these fences have at least one secure refuge and then have some replicate when they're very widespread, like the bilbies, to ensure that they genetically can adapt to the environments that they're used to. It's not a very clear answer, but, essentially, there do need to be more of these fenced areas.

JAANA DIELENBERG: Do you mind if I add a little bit to that answer?

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Please.

JAANA DIELENBERG: Absolutely, those fenced conservation areas have been pivotal in Australia preventing extinctions of native animals. At least 13 species now only occur in those kinds of fenced conservation areas and would have become extinct if it weren't for them. But I think it's really important to flag that they only represent about 1 per cent of the Australian landscape at this point. So, while they are critical to preventing an extinction, they're not enough to be maintaining those ecological functions at landscape scales, which is clearly what Dr Kanowski is working towards.

One of the things that we haven't talked about in terms of managing cats, which I think is important to put on your radar, is that in quite large studies in other parts of Australia, particularly northern Australia, the most effective strategy for maintaining native animal populations in the landscape was improved habitat. Areas that had more complex, higher quality habitat had less cats and healthier populations, and a bigger variety of native mammals, because it is generally harder.

For one thing, there are more resources for those native animals, and it can be harder for feral cats to hunt in those environments when they're dense. It won't work in all New South Wales landscapes, but in some areas it is worth considering that reducing vegetation clearing, improving fire management and reducing feral herbivores, which are much easier to control than cats—so we're talking about things like feral goats—could actually enable populations of native animals to persist in areas, despite some occurrence of cats in those landscapes.

The CHAIR: I have one follow-up question before I throw to others. You were talking to the Hon. Scott Barrett before. I also keep my cat indoors; it's quite easy for me to keep my cat inside. The Parliament just passed new rental laws that allow landlords to insist that a cat has to be kept outside. Unfortunately, I was the only one who objected to that, so I don't think that's going to change anytime soon. I'm just trying to work out how do we then marry those two things up? People have their own properties and it's much, much easier—people who can financially afford catios and things like that. But people who are renting, who are then told by the landlord that their rental agreement requires that they have to keep their cat outside, obviously they're the people who will continue to be fined, will probably end up losing their cat, or it will probably end up in the pound and be euthanised because of the difficulty with rehoming. How do we overcome that problem at the moment when we've got these new laws that go against? What if councils brought in cat-containment laws?

JAANA DIELENBERG: Based on the evidence of what improves the welfare of cats and what's important for us in terms of maintaining wildlife and reducing rates of cat-borne diseases in the community, it seems like that is something that the New South Wales Government should look at. Potentially, even though

they've just been passed, it might be that you review those laws because you can see that's not effective. I imagine, honestly, a cat that is a pet cat that's only kept outdoors and never allowed in your house is not much of a pet at all. It's more like just having a feral cat turn up and hang out in the garden from time to time, and you give it a bit of extra something. I'm not an expert on rental laws and policies, but certainly that approach wouldn't be supported as a responsible pet ownership practice.

The CHAIR: We should probably introduce pet friendly rentals into New South Wales to overcome that.

JAANA DIELENBERG: I'm not an expert in this space, but I have observed in other States changes to tenants' rights that have been more friendly towards pet ownership.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you, all of you, for coming today and for your evidence. I will ask one question of the AWC, which I think you touched on a little bit. One of the problems with the fencing obviously was a policy of desperation in some ways, having to fence wildlife in rather than maintain free-roaming native species populations. Are we looking at issues with genetic diversity and major problems? Ultimately, if we're taking a genetic diversity approach, this is a somewhat limited life program.

JOHN KANOWSKI: Yes, they're all good questions. We have our own geneticist and we work very closely with geneticists across the country and internationally, because that is a key consideration. What we're finding in some of our populations is that genetics—because we're reintroducing animals; we're not fencing animals in. They're not there; they've gone. They've been eradicated by the cat. You're fencing the cats and foxes out and then you're creating space for the native animals to live. They are large. The fenced area is 100 square kilometres—that's from here to the airport to the coast. It's a big area to wander in. They're not bumping into—it's not like a cat containment fence.

Some of the populations we've established have higher genetic diversity than the remnant ones on islands, because we're able to go to multiple remnant populations and create a mixed genetic founder population. The short answer is there are a number of issues with fences, of course. They're a bit of infrastructure imposed on the landscape. Like any solution, you've got to manage for the pros and the cons. For many native species, as Jaana said, they are the last stand and that's why we do it. We would love there to be a better solution. That's why we're pushing gene drives as a long-term solution. It's a bit unknown. But in the meantime, there are necessary—I wouldn't call them an evil, but there are necessary interventions that we need to do to save our wildlife.

JOEY CLARKE: To add a tiny bit, you can see in some of the submission that we've got some species at multiple sites, and that gives us the opportunity to monitor genetics at those different sites and manage, as we call it, a meta population. That means we can take animals from one place and put them into another one. Although they're isolated geographically, we can manage them in an integrated way so that, overall, you've got a larger, more genetically diverse population. That's definitely part of our approach.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I'm very grateful for the map you provided on page 8 of your submission. It's a bit stark, but it was great to hear of those additional projects that are being worked on now. From a species evolutionary perspective, we are in a very experimental phase with genetics. We're talking about a 20- or 30-year intervention in genetics, compared to millions of years of evolution. Obviously the geneticists are aware of that, but is it commonly accepted that this is a very experimental phase in terms of extinction?

JOHN KANOWSKI: It's well established as an intervention. The mammal action plan, the authoritative text that came out on conservation of Australian mammals now 10 years ago—this is really one of the very few conservation interventions that you really know will work for most species. But you do have to manage the genetics carefully when you're setting it up and long term. But that's fine. The reality is that many of our threatened wildlife, regardless of whether they're in the fence or not, are isolated now from each other. Things like the mountain pygmy possum—those little populations up in the ski runs are not fenced, but they need to be maintained through the same way by moving animals around to maintain their genetic health. That's a broader problem. The fences are really not the issue. It's really the fact that wildlife have gone from being across Australia to being in these little refuge areas.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Ms Dielenberg, earlier you mentioned some of the pseudoscience around what is viable in terms of different programs that are being promoted. I'm curious about your views or any research in relation to the trap, neuter and release programs, and those program impacts on biodiversity, particularly in urban areas.

JAANA DIELENBERG: If cats are trapped and released, they continue to have an impact on wildlife. They can continue to spread diseases. I have been told by some advocates of that method that it is proven, but there is no evidence that it reduces cat numbers in the landscape over time. In fact, there's evidence that it doesn't. I've been told that it is cheaper, but it's certainly not cheaper to catch a semi-wild cat and neuter it and return it

than it would be to euthanise the cat. We are in the position where we do need to euthanise cats on the street. We have not spent any time looking at the gene drive.

But with regard to the question about would it impact pet cats, if your cat is contained, it's not going to impact it. If your cats are desexed, your cats are not going to be impacted. Most cats should be desexed. But it would help to overcome the issue that in Australia we have at least 50,000 healthy cats and kittens being put down by shelters every year because of irresponsible pet owners who don't get their cat desexed. They're breeding, sometimes just with other pet cats, sometimes with feral cats in our suburban areas. If we want to reduce numbers of these cat-borne diseases in the Australian community, we need to get cats off the street.

One of the other bits of misinformation that I frequently hear talked about is this idea that semi-owned cats—community cats that might live in the community and that people enjoy seeing and just give them a bit of something every now and again—are living a nice life. They're actually living very short, very hard lives, where they're very likely to be attacked by dogs, end up with abscesses or other diseases, be hit by cars and suffer all kinds of other misfortune. It's one of the reasons why cats that are kept fully contained live much longer and healthier lives.

In fact, studies that have asked pet owners about their cats found very high rates. Have you lost a cat to a car accident? Very high rates of injury and death occur to cats that are allowed to roam, and that's what happens to these cats that are left in the community. Leaving them out there for a few more years, to have a few more litters of kittens before they get hit by a car, is really just adding to the problem of maintaining cats in our suburbs. When you do any kind of pest control program, you want to get in there and do it really effectively so that you don't just constantly have to keep playing whack-a-mole.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you very much for your very comprehensive submission. I note that you start the recommendations with developing a clear legal pathway. Do you think that in the absence of a clear regulatory framework—given that is your first recommendation, can you elaborate on why you think that is such an important starting point to ultimately have, from what I can gather from your submission, an effective and robust pathway to get to control of populations?

JAANA DIELENBERG: It's not just our view; it's also the view of the New South Wales local government association, who have been calling for it. A lot of New South Wales local governments have themselves been calling for changes to the Companion Animals Act to make it easier for them to be proactive on cats. In Western Australia and New South Wales, the overarching State legislation is the most problematic in terms of not being supportive of local governments being able to easily adopt policies and implement them.

While I can completely understand that, in New South Wales the approach that could probably be rolled out most rapidly is setting up enabling legislation that allows individual local governments to take action individually. We would really encourage you to support that with a statewide guidance pack that can provide a template for an effective cat management plan, an exemplary example of a cat containment policy—ones that councils can take and adapt—and these kinds of guidance measures. I think that would be an effective way to move this forward in New South Wales.

That's not to say that a statewide approach in itself would not have value. I was recently involved in some consultations for the South Australian Government's statewide cat management plan. While I certainly can't speak for what they will ultimately decide, there did seem to be a very strong inclination by stakeholders and people involved in the value of having a statewide approach and all local governments having the same rules. That in itself makes some things a lot more efficient, in terms of communicating with the public. It also overcomes some issues with equity and confusion amongst the community when you have issues with, "Well, this was the rule here. When I got the cat, I could do this. But now I've moved three kilometres away and the rules are different for me."

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I'm just curious, there was some submission made and some discussion before this inquiry about the impacts that cat control and cat containment may have on certain parts of the farming or rural sector, and particularly primary production. One of the cases brought to our attention was the dairy industry and that cats are an effective control of mice and rats that would otherwise eat or destroy expensive machinery. Have you looked at or are you aware of any research around this or alternatives for controlling mice or rat populations in the rural sector?

JAANA DIELENBERG: In terms of actually referring to specific studies, I can take the question on notice and provide a summary of whatever studies there might be available. In general, what we see in rural and agricultural landscapes is that cats just follow the pulses. They're not an incredibly effective method for controlling rodents. When times are good and there are lots of rodents around the cat, cats breed up and follow the pulse but

they don't change it. Ultimately, when you've got lots of rats and mice around, you tend to have lots of rats and mice around and flowing in from other parts of the landscape, regardless of having cats.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: My question is to the Australian Wildlife Conservancy. I see that your network, would it be right to say, is primarily a lifeboat solution at the moment?

JOHN KANOWSKI: That's certainly one way of characterising it, yes, Robert.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Therefore, it's a holding position. That's what you're saying. Do you see it ever expanding with the possibility of eliminating feral cats from the environment?

JOHN KANOWSKI: We would certainly like to do that. In our projects with NSW National Parks, which are currently up for negotiation around a second 10-year period—should we have that project extended? We aim to try to take the populations we've established in these fenced areas in the Pilliga and down at Mallee Cliffs and try to establish them in the broader landscape around the fenced area through using various forms of cat and fox control. I guess that's a lifeboat with a halo around it. It's still limited in the landscape, and we won't get beyond the protected areas unless we have something like gene drive, which works at scale.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Yes, I've done some reading about your process of releasing bred animals outside in what you call a halo. I hadn't heard it called that before. What actually has been the result of that and the cat control in those areas? Can you get the animals to a critical level of population with a suppression of the cats that they can actually survive outside of the fence?

JOHN KANOWSKI: Where we've started this work is in Western Australia where we can aerially bait with a cat specific bait called Eradicat. There we've been able to establish two locally extinct mammals: the western quoll, which is a predator, and the brush-tailed possum, which we know from our rooves if you live in a city but is completely wiped out in the bush. We've established them with limited cat predation, but we're about to embark on the next level down of vulnerability. This year we plan to release an animal called a woylie, a brush-tailed bettong, which was in New South Wales. We simply have no idea how that will go. It's a bit of suck it and see. We do the baiting. We have a whole monitoring system with remote cameras that we use to count the cats before and after the baiting. We release the animals with all the monitoring gear on them and we see how it goes. If that's successful, then we'll move to the next level of vulnerability. That's what we have planned for New South Wales as well.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Are those areas subject to fox predation as well?

JOHN KANOWSKI: Yes. The Eradicat bait also controls foxes. It probably controls foxes better than it controls cats.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: And those baits are aerially dropped, you say? In New South Wales, most of the baiting is done by digging and burying baits. I'm not aware of much aerial baiting except in national parks for wild dogs.

JOHN KANOWSKI: Yes, the laws are different in every State and also the baits and so on. There are different regulations as to what you can use. I'm not familiar with what's possible in New South Wales, but it is a limitation on what we can do.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: What actually happens to any cats that breach your fences and get into the reserves?

JOHN KANOWSKI: Despite having this big network of fences, we've only had, I think, five breaches across decades of work. That's usually, a bit like Jaana's husband, when someone leaves the door open. We've had a lot of radio collared cats outside our fences. They simply do not—it's a pretty simple barrier, a floppy top fence, with some hot wires on the outside. It's extremely effective. The breaches are mostly through human error. Just on the weekend, the floods in the Pilliga washed down our fenced area up there in a couple of places. We will institute an incursion protocol with lots of monitoring and step up our control if we find cats in the fence. But it hasn't been a problem across our network for the decades we've been running it.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I'm aware—and I don't know whether it's your reserves—of where there have been control programs carried out within some of these enclosed areas and the cats do occasionally get in.

JOHN KANOWSKI: There was a fenced area in Queensland that wasn't maintained very well that cats breached. We check our fence three times a week. We have people driving these large fences three times a week.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: In this particular case, they were using dogs to find them and then shoot them. That's what they were doing. Do you support the capture of feral, neuter and release programs that are being mooted around the traps?

JOHN KANOWSKI: We don't have a view on it. There's really not a lot of nexus between the management of cats in urban areas and the feral cats. There's obviously a bit of genetic connection. We would be concerned, particularly, if there were to be larger cats imported into Australia like the savannah cat. The genetics of those could get into the wild cat population and that means that the size of the prey that feral cats could take would increase. Other than that, we don't really interact with that particular issue.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I might ask the Biodiversity Council the same question. What's your view on that?

JAANA DIELENBERG: We don't support trap, neuter, release at all. It is not an effective method to reduce cats in the landscape. It doesn't improve the welfare of those cats and it also doesn't reduce rates of predation of wildlife in areas where people live or rates of diseases, and it increases the risk that those unowned re-released cats are going to spread diseases to your own cats and your family. We can't really see any benefit to those programs other than maintaining unowned cats in our landscapes, which is exactly what we need to be trying to avoid.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: In terms of feral cats being captured, what would you advocate be done? What should be done with them?

JAANA DIELENBERG: In urban areas, any cat that's not a pet cat should be considered a feral cat. It's absolutely reasonable that whoever is capturing the cats considers a temperament test. If they appear to be suitable for rehoming, they could be rehomed. But cats actually breed really fast. They breed as fast as rabbits, if you can imagine that. We have an oversupply of pet cats available for homes in Australia. Anything we can do to reduce the number of cats is really going to improve welfare options, including for the pet cat population. We have too many healthy kittens and cats being put down because there simply aren't enough homes for them.

As well, we've spoken a lot about containment. Absolutely, we are very strong advocates of requiring all pet cats, unless you have a special licence as a breeder, to be desexed by four months of age. That's because, particularly depending on what season it is, cats can become sexually mature from four months of age. That's how we end up with these unwanted litters. That just adds to the problem, and it adds to the level of cats that will need to be put down in future because we have more and more cats. That's why, when whatever method or whatever approach is taken, it should really advocate basically going hard early and getting on top of the problem, because in the long term it would reduce not only the suffering of cats in terms of the number of cats that are caught or euthanised but also the cost to the pound system and the stress on people who work in those pound systems. They are often euthanising largely healthy, happy animals—for want of a better word—because there are far more cats than there are people available to look after them.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I have one more question.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Borsak, we've run over time. I might get you to ask any further questions to the witnesses on notice, if that's okay.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Actually, I wanted to ask it now while the witnesses are here.

The CHAIR: You can put it on record now. That's fine.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: We hear a lot of talk about puppy farms. Do you think we should have similar legislation in relation to cat breeding?

JAANA DIELENBERG: If I'm allowed to give a very short answer, yes, absolutely. All breeding should be done humanely and ethically and meet all the welfare and behavioural needs of whatever animal it is—absolutely.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for coming here this morning and for your time today. If there were any questions taken on notice, the secretariat will be in contact and, of course, if the Committee has further questions, they'll send them through the secretariat as well.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr KERRY ROBINSON, OAM, Chief Executive Officer, Blacktown City Council, affirmed and examined

Ms ROSALIE HORTON, Senior Coordinator, Blacktown Animal Rehoming Centre, affirmed and examined

Ms GINA VEREKER, Director, Liveable Communities, Tamworth Regional Council, affirmed and examined

Dr DIANA RAYMENT, Director and Treasurer, Australian Institute of Animal Management, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our next witnesses. Thank you for joining us here today. Do we have a short opening statement from Tamworth council?

GINA VEREKER: Thank you for the invitation. Tamworth Regional Council welcomes this inquiry, and we do appreciate being invited to attend. Tamworth Regional Council acknowledges the significant impact of cats—owned, stray, community and feral—on wildlife and our biodiversity. In this regard, in 2023 council actually adopted a policy position that acknowledges those impacts, calls for the mandatory desexing of cats and the mandatory containment of cats, as well as the tightening of the weak regulations around breeding of cats and the permit system. That policy position was submitted to the Local Government NSW conference of 2023.

We believe containment can be effective and could be effective, but it requires some standards to be set and, as we've heard earlier this morning, advice and guidance about how to contain your cat and options to address affordability. If it is to work, it definitely needs mandatory desexing, broadscale desexing programs, enforcement of that desexing and compliance. How that will occur is the biggest issue. Funding is required, and assistance with funding. Local government can't afford it all, so the State needs to pick up and step up in terms of funding for broadscale desexing and for assisting those rescues that do such a wonderful job out there to assist local government. I think I'll leave it there.

KERRY ROBINSON: Thank you for the opportunity to present this morning. I start by acknowledging the Dharug people as the traditional custodians of the land on which Blacktown City is located. I pass on the apologies of Mayor Brad Bunting, who's interstate this morning. I'm the CEO of Blacktown council. Rose Horton is with me. She's the brains on the pretty face. Rose is a qualified animal scientist, animal behaviourist, teacher, zookeeper, vet nurse and educator. Rose was previously shelter manager of RSPCA Blue Mountains, and prior to this she was a senior behavioralist at the Animal Welfare League. She continues to lecture. As a preamble, we thank the many volunteers and volunteer organisations that assist this council, Blacktown City, and other councils with rehoming. We couldn't deliver to the community's expectations without them. But the rehoming of cats is very, very problematic.

In 2023, Chair, you might recall I presented to the Portfolio Committee No. 8 inquiry into the management of pounds and shelters. I pointed to the influx of animals into New South Wales shelters, which overwhelms their capacity. I note also that Blacktown City is the largest council in New South Wales. We serve a resident population of 435,000 people and 30,000 businesses. I note that there's a presumption in the community, pretty much, that all councils, especially in Sydney, are the same size. I just put on record that Hunter's Hill Council has a population of 13,600 people, while Blacktown City has a population of 435,000 people. I mention that mainly to draw attention to the fact that councils have differing capacities. I also draw the Committee's attention to the fact that, since 1978 in this State, State governments have capped the rates of councils. Effectively, councils are funded in New South Wales to do what they did in 1978, with a less than CPI increment over time.

If the State wants councils to do things, the State must fund those things because otherwise you are asking councils to cut existing services. In 2023 our animal rehoming team dealt with 639 cats, of which we were able to rehome just 249. We returned 11 to their owners and a further 26 were rehomed by the wonderful volunteers at rescue organisations. I want to draw attention to Blacktown City Council's investment in animal rehoming. We take our companion animal responsibilities very seriously. In 2023 Blacktown City opened the Blacktown Animal Rehoming Centre. Madam Chair, I thank you for taking time out of your busy agenda to visit that facility recently. Council invested some $36 million to create a state-of-the-art facility that boasts best practice, with capacity for over 200 cats. We'd welcome, once again, the opportunity to host this Committee at BARC to demonstrate what we consider to be the best companion animal facility in the country.

That facility has 26 staff who work at the facility, which is open seven days a week. At BARC—Blacktown Animal Rehoming Centre—Blacktown City Council looks after the companion animals of seven councils: Canada Bay, Fairfield, Hunters Hill, Parramatta, Ryde, Willoughby and Woollahra. We also have strong alliances and programs in place with University of Sydney, Western Sydney University and New South Wales TAFE, which allows BARC to be used for the training of veterinarians and allied health professionals. BARC adheres to Getting to Zero and other initiatives to reduce animals from becoming impounded, through education and free microchipping.

More specifically, in relation to cats, while we recognise that the amending of the Companion Animals Act to restrict free-roaming cats may increase cat impoundment, we also see this as a crucial movement for legislative change to improve cat management and protect native species. Our priority is not punitive income generation but implementing a framework to empower councils. Mandated desexing supported by free or subsidised desexing services and comprehensive educational campaigns could drive significant progress in responsible pet ownership but, as I said, councils need budget to perform that valuable work. We acknowledge that existing laws primarily impact lawful pet owners and that the core issue lies with semi-owned and unowned cat populations in the urban environment. Estimates suggest that thousands of these cats are causing distress in our community by invading residential areas and hording premises and parklands. Worse, those populations, particularly at the urban fringe and relative to conservation parklands, are doing inordinate damage to our native animals.

Despite overwhelming demand for assistance from residents, Blacktown City Council faces legal limitations in addressing the challenges of cats. To advance practical solutions, we seek guidance on how councils can legally re-release cats under a trap, neuter, return program if one were to be established, or to establish managed cat colonies. I reiterate that we would need additional budget in order to perform those functions. Blacktown City Council values the opportunity to contribute to this discussion and address this multifaceted issue with effective, collaborative approaches.

The CHAIR: Is there an opening statement from the AIAM?

DIANA RAYMENT: Yes, thank you, Madam Chair. The Australian Institute of Animal Management appreciates the opportunity to present evidence to the inquiry and thanks the Committee for its invitation. AIAM, the national peak body for local government animal management officers, comprises professionals engaged in various aspects of companion animal management. AIAM directors actively contribute to domestic cat management policy and practice development through multiple working groups, advocacy and research. Additionally, AIAM hosts a national local government domestic cat management discussion group where local government staff regularly discuss topics of interest and share learnings. We advocate for data-driven, best-practice domestic cat management tailored to each community and built on targeted, free cat desexing programs delivered by local government in collaboration with community stakeholders. I would like to table the document *The Intertwined lives of cats and people* for the Committee's reference.

The AIAM board recognises that management of domestic cats that are neither fully owned nor living independently of humans is a significant challenge for animal management teams. As you can see in the graphic, millions of Australians interact with semi-owned and unowned cats that live within our communities and are often cared for by our most vulnerable community members. Uncontrolled domestic cat populations are largest in low socio-economic areas and, according to Animal Medicines Australia, cat owners are more likely to come from lower income brackets and have family members requiring regular care. Of the 5.3 million pet cats in Australia, approximately half are casually acquired. That means their owners did not actually go out and seek ownership of those cats; those cats chose them. Despite ongoing debates about the roles of cats in Australia, cats are an integral part of our communities, especially loved by those facing systematic disadvantage or social inequality.

AIAM acknowledges the complexity of developing legislative frameworks for managing these domestic cats that are neither fully owned nor living independently. Enforcement models for owned pets and feral cat strategies are ineffective for these cats, and punishing their caregivers further damages relationships between local government, local laws teams and their communities. This complicates animal management initiatives while failing to achieve a reduction in cat breeding or population numbers. The complexity and difficulty of achieving positive outcomes for these cats and people should not be a barrier to simply getting on and getting the job done though.

Recently in an AIAM meeting, Paul Flint, a fantastic AMO from Walgett in New South Wales who participated in the RSPCA Keeping Cats Safe at Home program, commented to us that the opportunity provided to him by the program to be proactive in addressing cat populations allowed him to be the most effective he has ever been during his entire career. His results are backed by solid data that you have already seen in the RSPCA submission but, as of December, he is now facing going back to the old ways of enforcement-centric cat management due to a lack of resources and support to keep the program running. That's distressing for Paul, and he can speak for himself. I would suggest getting in contact with him. This is despite the cost savings demonstrated by multiple programs of this nature.

Focusing discussion on cat management on the legality or the effectiveness of TNR fails to acknowledge that internationally recognised best-practice cat management has already been implemented in Australia within existing legal frameworks by teams working with their communities to control cat populations and convert caregivers into owners. Today I invite the Committee to consider how to build skills in and provide resources to AMOs to effectively enable them to deliver collaborative, targeted, free cat desexing programs that we know

work. Additionally, I encourage harnessing the current community sentiment towards failing approaches to domestic cat management to establish data-driven, best-practice cat management as the norm in New South Wales.

The CHAIR: I might start with a few questions for Dr Rayment—thank you so much for your submission. You state in your submission that you strongly support the containment on owner's property, where possible, of cats, but you don't support making cat containment itself a mandatory requirement. As an organisation that obviously represents animal managers who are likely to be on the ground actually enforcing cat containment laws, if they were to come in, can you explain why you oppose it becoming mandatory and prefer a more educative approach?

DIANA RAYMENT: Essentially, because it doesn't work. The vast majority of the cats that are in this cohort of cats, which are the most difficult to actually manage, are not owned. So the people who are actually caring for them don't consider themselves to be owners, and often they're actually not in a position to contain the cats even if they wanted to. Think about people living in housing commission houses or potentially in rented properties where they actually don't have the ability to change fencing or install things if they can afford it.

The other side of that is that they also don't see themselves as the owners of the cats. If you see the cats in your community as autonomous individuals and you provide care for them out of empathy and a feeling of compassion for those cats, that doesn't necessarily mean that you consider yourself to be the owner of the cat, even if you are providing cat caregiving behaviours. What that does mean is we actually need to get in with those people, help them become the owners of the cat so they recognise themselves as the owners, and then facilitate the ownership behaviours that we want from there, at the same time as getting control over the population of cats. Essentially, work with them, drive the numbers down, and actually get on top of the situation instead of reacting to it reflectively after the time—essentially, once the population is out of control. Once they've recognised themselves as owners and we've got the population under control, we are then working on how we go about managing the population of owned cats. So we essentially shrink that population of community cats and turn them into owned cats, and then we have a population of owners that we can work with.

The CHAIR: In your opening statement you talked a lot about the program that the RSPCA ran which was educational based. You said that's proven to be extremely effective. If we've got an educational program that has proven to be effective at changing people's behaviours, encouraging people to keep their cats contained wherever that is possible, given some of the concerns we've had—given this whole semi-owned issue and given the issue we have with rental properties, with landlords being able to insist that a cat is outside—should we be bringing in punitive laws which seek to fine people if the cat escapes, if the cat gets outside, or where they're in a situation where, as you mentioned in housing commission, they can't keep the cat indoors? Should we be focused more on this educational program, seeing where we can get with that, and doing research around how effective that is before we jump to something that's so punitive, that's going to be extremely detrimental to people who are already struggling?

DIANA RAYMENT: The short answer to that is yes. The longer answer to that is that, essentially, what we're aiming to do is remove the barriers for people to become owners. When you put laws in place that make it more difficult for people to become owners, what you're doing is essentially putting a barrier in front of yourself and in front of the aims for your team, which is to convert your caregivers to owners. What we try and do is make that conversion as easy as we possibly can. Like I said, essentially we try to get all of those people who are already caring for these cats in the community to become the owners of the cats by assisting that and getting voluntary compliance with assistance as the first priority approach we take, then we work with those people at a pace where they can be successful.

Then, once we've got that and we've got the majority of these owners, like any new initiative you bring in, you're looking at 80 per cent to 90 per cent voluntary compliance first. Then, once we've got that, we start looking at if we potentially need to use enforcement or use enforcement only in cases where we have an owner who is just absolutely unwilling to be involved using assisted voluntary compliance approaches. We want to be working on education, but education will only work with owners who see themselves as owners and are interested in education. Nobody thinks of themselves as an irresponsible pet owner. Nobody thinks of themselves as a terrible person. So when you use education, you really need to be conscious of the fact that how you're interacting with the people that you're targeting is equally important. You need to understand how they see themselves and you need to understand their relationships with the animals they're working with, and then go from there.

In regard to the RSPCA's program, I would suggest that the most effective part of that program was the targeted cat desexing. Having spoken with Paul and some of the other people who were working on the ground in local governments, and also seeing the parallels between keeping cats safe at home, the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation's annual cat desexing, the microtargeted desexing, and the enabling AMOs and those that they're working with collaboratively—the rescue groups, the shelters and everybody who is jumping in and providing

those services to this target group of cat caregivers. When they're working together and they're able to provide those services for those cats, it's much cheaper, because you get in, you get the cat desexed and you get it chipped. You get all of those things done versus spending all of your time trying to enforce. Also what it does is it creates a relationship with the target group of owners. So when a new cat pops up that's not desexed, they reach out for help rather than hiding the cat. You don't have people who are sabotaging traps. You don't have all of these things going on. It really is a case of education sitting beside and around that assisted voluntary compliance model, rather than just taking an education or enforcement approach.

The CHAIR: I will throw quickly to either Ms Horton or Mr Robinson. It's lovely to see you both again. I wanted to ask about TNR programs. On the last hearing day we had a lot of research that was put forward by Dr Rand, who has done an amount of research in this particular space. I can't remember if your council was particularly involved in that work with the RSPCA. You also mentioned TNR in your opening statement. Is that another tool in the tool belt that you support and that you see could be extremely beneficial?

ROSALIE HORTON: Partially. We also support what the Biodiversity Council is saying about trap, neuter and release. We're still not effectively challenging anything where these cats are predating on species, and also having a long and welfare-orientated life. We support trap, neuter and rehome as part of our programs. We have a pretty robust behaviour assessment system and rehab system at our facility using our support network of foster carers and volunteers. That's been a really great way of getting a lot of these cats, particularly kittens, that are found in our community out into loving homes where they can be rehabbed. We don't in any way want more cats being put out into the street. We already have more than enough of that going on, so we don't think that would help.

We appreciate the science behind these managed colonies. There is certainly some really great evidence. Dr Jacquie Rand and Dr Diana Rayment can certainly talk about areas where you can have a person who is technically the owner, so it's chipped and registered in their name. We would be supportive if these animals were found and brought to our facility, then we say, "Oh, that belongs to Joe Bloggs' colony. We'll release it without any impounding fees." We'd like to support that. But we still think that while cats are in these kinds of pseudo semi-owned situations, they're just not safe. I understand that there is some science behind the reproductive slowing down. That can be something we could look into, but it's not really where we would like to go. We'd really like to be a lot more hard-hitting and not have any more cats on the street.

KERRY ROBINSON: If I could add, Madam Chair, coming from the regulatory point of view, to take an action against an owner, we are going to have to prove the ownership of the animal. That's the first thing. There are challenges with that with migratory animals. Also, whilst an animal might be chipped, the owners might have let it go and it may have moved on, if you like. The other point I'd make is that local government is obliged to know who owns land within their area. Local government is not obliged to know, nor does it know, who lives in an area. So we have an issue of potentially needing to link an animal to land not knowing who a resident in a dwelling is, and then needing to prove ownership of that animal to someone that council has no recognition of or no relationship with. I'd suggest they are significant challenges.

The CHAIR: That's not something I had thought of either, so thank you for that. I have one more question before I throw to Ms Abigail Boyd, who's joining us online. As you mentioned, both myself and the Hon. Peter Primrose had the pleasure of coming out there recently. Thank you for hosting us. Obviously, the council has invested a significant amount of money in building a very good pound compared to, unfortunately, many of the other pounds we've seen. But I also know that it quickly came to capacity. We heard about that in the other inquiry, that we've got a pound crisis. It's not just Blacktown pound that is experiencing this; this is right across the State.

We heard concerns in the other hearing in this inquiry that where mandatory cat containment laws were introduced, there was an enormous increase in the number of cats that were being impounded, so much so that many of the councils ended up not enforcing the mandatory cat containment laws because they weren't able to handle the number of animals coming in. Of course, we've got a vet shortage as well, which I'm sure is also impacting the pound. I guess I've got two questions. I know you mentioned funding, but I'm trying to understand how much funding we would potentially need.

I am assuming we would need a huge expansion of every pound facility to be able to handle the intake of all the additional animals. Also, what is the impact? In other council areas where this has been introduced, we've seen a really significant increase in the euthanasia rates for cats. I want to understand how that actually impacts the staff who work in pounds, particularly with the vet shortage. How would the councils propose to deal with that significant increase in euthanasia and the stress it puts on staff, and also the lack of pound facilities to actually take in these additional cats?

ROSALIE HORTON: What a great question. I think everyone who is watching this who works in the shelter situation would appreciate that question. We are representatives of an amazing team who are affected by

euthanasia, which is very heavily offset by adoption. Even though we might get in a lot more animals, yes, we have to triage the ones that are rehabilitatable and the ones that are adoptable. Then there are also the ones that are sick that are bringing in disease and bringing in zoonosis—we can triage them. There could be more euthanasia. But that is a very glass half empty approach. We could also see that there could be a lot more adoptions, less cats on the streets and lots more in the loving homes that are out there. We really do want to be on the right side of history for this. Kerry and I are just representatives of a really great team who are seeing so many animals coming in. At the moment, we are even turning cats away and just saying, "Look, the legislation isn't there yet." We're in a grey area of: What do you do if you've found a cat? We can only enforce a rule or legislation that exists.

We would like to spearhead something where we could show or maybe even advise other councils how this could be done. We really would like to trial it. When it comes to compassion fatigue, it is very significant. From my experience, what really alleviates compassion fatigue is having more really great, compassionate people around. You did mention the vet shortage. We would also like to explore that. We would like to have more vets, more behaviorists and more animal advocates as part of our team who can help with the rehabilitation of a lot of the animals. We think that compassion fatigue is, unfortunately, a very necessary side effect of what we do. It just shows the importance of our work. Thank you for that question.

KERRY ROBINSON: Madam Chair, as to the budget to do more, this State Government precludes councils having a budget for the delivery of libraries, pools and community meeting places in growth areas. In the case of Blacktown City, we have an incoming population of a quarter of a million people who will not have a pool, who will not have a library and who will not have a meeting hall because of this State Government's policy and past State governments' policies. That is an unfunded liability that Blacktown council carries of some $731 million. I just suggest that if you are asking us for more budget to go to capital works for companion animals, that will need to be ranked by councillors against the liabilities delivered by the State's Department of Planning and Environment, which said those facilities were required. Its policies preclude us from levying developers for those things.

The CHAIR: Just to clarify, we understand that it would be a significant cost because there would be a significant increase of animals coming through. Assuming that that money comes from the State Government, is there any kind of ballpark figure for the cost to be able to actually run mandatory cat containment?

KERRY ROBINSON: I'll answer that, Madam Chair, in a rather oblique way, which is to say: We're very, very grateful to the State for giving us Western Sydney Infrastructure Grants for seven community buildings, with a budget of $273 million. The operating cost for those seven community buildings is $30 million each year. The council's current total rate revenue is $250-odd million. I am suggesting that it is not so much the capex—thank you very much, State Government—but the opex that the community needs to fund. It is a very substantial percentage, relative to the capital investment.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Good morning to all of you. Thank you so much for coming along. Can we first talk about trap , neuter, release. There is a long distance between embracing TNR as a strategy in and of itself to deal with cat populations or reduce cat populations, versus the prohibition on TNR and how it then impacts on desexing levels. Does the prohibition on TNR and the inability to release after desexing decrease the number of cats that are being desexed? Is there room for us to have TNR as a last resort, in your view?

ROSALIE HORTON: I will start this one off. I think Diana Rayment is probably going to finish it. We have discussed this quite a bit. As I mentioned before, I don't like the "R" meaning "release". Releasing a companion animal makes no sense. If you are rehoming it or returning it to its owner, that is what we want to see out of council. We see no purpose in saying, "Okay, yes, look, this animal doesn't have an owner." For the example, let's put it in Joe Bloggs's name. Dr Rayment certainly has the evidence of where it can work. We at Blacktown City Council know that there are some really amazing volunteers who are slightly clandestine who are doing this themselves. We can already see that it's just an overwhelming situation to put on unpaid, well-meaning people who are doing it in their local areas. We are helping them out where we can. If they are able to trap the mum and bring them in, we will desex it and release it to that person. But I think managed colonies is more Dr Diana Rayment's area of expertise.

DIANA RAYMENT: For us, the main thing to know about TNR is that in an effective cat management program the need for it should be very minimal. Essentially what we are trying to do is create a collaborative relationship with the people who we are working with who are caring for the cats. You imagine what people think TNR is: You go out, you trap the cat—you don't know who is taking care of this cat and you don't know who the caregiver is—you desex the cat and you pop it back. That is great in that if you do it at a high enough level, you will drive population numbers down. Essentially you are getting population control over the cats. But you can manage the situation much more effectively by going out, identifying the caregivers within the community who are providing the most resources for this cohort of cats and then desexing those cats.

The cats that they are caring for—the adult cats that are breeding—are the cats that are actually producing the population. Rather than going out and just picking up cats, desexing cats and then popping them back, we know from where it has been done and the little bits and pieces that have been done in Australia that we have got data on and also internationally, the absolute vast majority of cats who are TNRed have somebody taking care of them. They are not just out, living on their own and fending for themselves like a feral cat that just happens to be living with people. Somebody is taking care of that cat.

We also know that when you microtarget, so when you go out and find the caregivers who are providing the most resources and you basically get at that reproductive cohort of cats, you desex them and you keep on top of that population of cats, the population numbers nosedive. You don't need to desex anywhere near as many cats. You are talking a single digit per 100,000 people in the population, versus—according to some of the numbers coming out of the states—30 to 60 cats upwards per 100,000 of your population. The resources involved—just the sheer money and the number of desexes that you need to do using just a straight TNR approach versus a targeted desexing approach—are worlds apart.

Essentially, the other thing that we know—and this is a thing to be mindful of; it's only relatively recent research that's come out—is that for those countries that are actually further ahead than us in terms of pulling all these cats in, rehabilitating them, getting them out and rehoming them, what we're now seeing is a trend towards the adopters having a poorer experience when the cats have lower sociability levels, which makes sense. If you're going to adopt a cat, you want a pet cat; you don't want a cat that's got sketchy sociability and doesn't actually have any bond with you. That might take six or 12 months. There is definitely a cohort of adopters who will do that but it's not your average pet owner. The actual number of those cats that exist in the community that already have people caring for them versus the number of people who want to adopt that cat is hugely different. It's that 50 per cent of people who have casually acquired a cat as a pet.

We really need to be mindful of the fact that every single cat we pull into a system needs to have an outcome. We have this cohort of cats which aren't not adoptable; they're not feral. They're usually scared when they come in, but they actually have had some type of emotional connection with people, and they've got a bond and they've got some level of sociability. But they also don't make great adoption candidates. What we've essentially done is removed that cat from an environment where it had somebody who cared for it and taken it away, and it now doesn't have anybody who's going to be able to care for it. Most people don't want to adopt it and, if they do, it's not necessarily going to be a positive outcome.

Basically, what we want to do is take the TNR part. We still ideally would have the TNR part, but that shouldn't be the primary thing. We shouldn't be going into communities and just implementing this without actually talking to these people and targeting our resources. We've got limited resources; we need to target them where we can actually use them most effectively. We don't want to be imposing on a group of vulnerable members of our community anyway. It is not the aim of good management to be imposing things on people. Yes, I do genuinely think that there is a role for TNR, but it should be minor. From our perspective, focusing on TNR and whether it's legal or not is really—I don't want this to sound blunt, but it's a bit short-sighted. It's not TNR or trap and kill and trap and rehome. They are not the only two options.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Yes, I one hundred per cent agree. Can I ask the councils, of the cats that you're seeing come in that have been collected, how many are microchipped? And I'll just add a second question in here so that you can answer it most efficiently: Do you see kitten farms as a problem in your local areas?

GINA VEREKER: I'm happy to comment on that. Very few cats are microchipped, and very few are registered as well, of the ones that come in. Those who are usually belong to people who are already doing the right thing, if you understand. Those cats come in because they can no longer afford to look after them or they escape. But the majority of cats we see aren't microchipped, and we certainly have a very high incidence of kittens coming in, or pregnant cats, and they are definitely not microchipped. What was the second part of your question?

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Kitten farms.

GINA VEREKER: Kitten farms, yes. That's the problem where someone can very easily become a breeder, and that permit allows you to continue to have kittens and kittens and kittens. We see an awful lot of that, and I think maybe it's more prevalent in the regions—no, Ms Horton is disagreeing—but it certainly happens out in the regions. The problem there is how do we know who's doing that breeding. It's impossible to do compliance and regulatory action because we don't know who they are. It's just overwhelming in terms of kittens and the number of cats being bred, and we don't know until someone picks one up—it's abandoned; it's injured. If I can just comment on the cat colonies, we have a couple in the Tamworth region. The concern with trap, neuter and release or return is that those cat colonies—our experience is they're ill. They're not looked after. Most have cat flu or some other concern. They're not having a great life, so I would counter the idea that encouraging returning cats to a local colony is a great option. It certainly hasn't been—that's not what we've experienced.

ROSALIE HORTON: I can throw in Blacktown City Council's statistics. We'd say less than 10 per cent of the cats that we see are ever microchipped. Of that, our statistics have been pretty steady that less than 2 per cent of cats are ever reclaimed from our facility. That would leave the 8 per cent of those microchipped cats to either have outdated chips, so maybe they were chipped when they were little, or there can be a whole lot of different reasons why contact details aren't up to date. It also goes in with human nature. Sometimes people have their cat and it goes wandering. They don't see it for a couple of days and they don't turn their heads, compared to if their dog went missing and there'd be signs up and whatnot.

In regard to kitten farms, we don't see that, or Blacktown City Council has no evidence of anything like that. What we do see is a kitten season, which we would almost say is a kitten tsunami season. We just get so many kittens that have been brought in—"Oh, I didn't own it, but she comes around and she looks pregnant". We would get that all day long throughout the warmer months. We're still getting them now, versus "I found these kittens under my house" or "I found these kittens underneath my own cat". We have plenty of that.

It wouldn't necessarily be something that we would see, say, with puppy farms—intensive breeding and whatnot. This is just happening in the urban area. We certainly don't want anything like that to be happening, but we see more than enough kittens. Definitely we do have a huge reliance on our amazing foster carers and volunteers who've been helping out with that, and all the people around here who I hope to recruit who can also take on some kittens. But, yes, it certainly is a big issue. We think that desexing is the go but, again, who pays for a desexing if it's technically not your cat, and it's certainly one that you can't pick up?

Blacktown City Council has just joined the National Desexing Network to offer pretty cool prices and subsidised desexing for our residents, and we'd like to keep that ongoing. But, gee, it would be great if there was something like you can get with your Service NSW vouchers where you could get a couple of desexings for animals. We'd certainly endorse that as well, but our big one is making sure that the Companion Animals Act gets amended to stop them from roaming. You might find that if there are less cats out there roaming, there might even be less breeding.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: My question is perhaps to you, Ms Horton. I'm just looking through your submission, and I see the table in the appendix at the end which deals with the cats that are in the intake, reclaimed and euthanised. What's the difference in those numbers? For example, if you take 2023-24, it's about 692 animals. What happens to them?

ROSALIE HORTON: If I can be so bold, it was before my time, so there was a different way that cats were managed. What we started doing as a collective agreement is if these cats are being found by members of the public and brought in and they're saying, "Hey, here's a stray cat; I want to impound it", we say, "Well, the Companion Animals Act doesn't prevent this from happening; in actual fact, it's legal for cats to roam". People are very disappointed with that because they think, "Oh, I've done everything that's involved to bring in a cat, and I'm doing a great job". We say, "No, unfortunately, until the Companion Animals Act changes, you'll have to go and put that cat back".

The interesting thing is, though, sometimes we'll find it in a box the next morning, but what we do find is that we are able to rely on a lot more cat rescue groups that are in our area that are taking them in and working tirelessly on those ones. We feel bad. It's kind of like we've passed the buck a little bit, but we can only work within the laws that we're allowed to. Also, interestingly, while you're looking at those statistics, the previous years—decades—before that had what I would refer to as an earlier form of management, which is everything came in and got euthanised; we may as well just say it that way. It was certainly in a very humane way.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Ms Horton, you still haven't answered my question. My question was what's the reconciliation of the 692 animals in the last year. The table doesn't show that. Obviously there was a higher level of putting cats down—for example, in 2013-14 at 64 per cent. You're down to 21 per cent now, but only 13 cats out of 893 were claimed and 188 were put down. I ask again: What happened to the 692 that were brought in? Have they been neutered, released or rehomed? If so, shouldn't the table actually reconcile?

ROSALIE HORTON: It definitely should. My apologies for that if I have a discrepancy there. Yes, for the ones that are not accounted for, they have been adopted and they have been rehomed. There's also another way of breaking that down, and I can even provide these on notice for the statistics that we provide to the OLG.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Yes, if you could reconcile the figures—692 cats. If you've rehomed that many, you've done a fantastic job. I think the reality is that we really should be seeing exactly what is there. Are you saying—well, you are saying, because it's in your submission in point (g), I think it is—that the Companion Animals Act would need to be changed for you to be able to do more?

ROSALIE HORTON: We'd like to be able to have a clear delineation between what is a stray cat and what is something that we can take in and impound, because at the moment cats are allowed to roam legally. It's

very different from what regulations are around dogs. There are still the restrictions around food and protected wildlife areas, but seeing a cat walking down the street or into your backyard isn't an offence. Hopefully what we're planning is to be able to sort the wheat out from the chaff.

There are pet cats—there are owned cats—but then there are these semi-owned cats, and these are the ones that we've been referring to. Someone's feeding them or they're feeding off a garbage dump. These are the ones that are doing the unbridled breeding. We would hopefully then be able to have a taskforce that we would like to pioneer to have more dog catchers, but cat catchers, that can actually address this issue. Otherwise, telling people to contain their cats is one thing, but then we will have a very clear group of cats that don't have owners, and they'll need to be managed, and our community is asking on a daily basis for us to do something about it.

KERRY ROBINSON: But we would need budget to do that.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I see in that point there that you try to define what is the difference between a scared and stressed cat and a feral cat. A scared and stressed cat perhaps might live in a garbage dump or be fed by someone maybe once a week or once a day. But how do you, in practice, actually define the difference, when a feral cat and a stressed cat on the loose can do as much damage to the native environment and native species regardless of how you classify it?

ROSALIE HORTON: Yes, most definitely. What we like to do is to really educate people about the classifications of cats, because a true feral is a cat that has nothing to do with human intervention. It's not relying on humans for food, even if it's our refuse. They're the ones that you will see the Biodiversity Council referring to. Also, there has been a lot of work from Dr Gemma Ma's Keeping Cats Safe at Home and Professor Jacquie Rand talking about the categories of cats. There are owned cats, semi-owned cats and there are stray cats, but then there are feral cats. Now, I know they're all Felis catus to some people, but it's really their reliance on humans, and that's where we come in. If we work out what humans are actually doing to increase or discourage these cats, we can actually make a difference.

I can also go onto specifics, which is that in previous places where I've observed, when a cat is brought in in a trap, it can act like what we would say is a feral cat. It's lashing out; it's highly aggressive. Really, what it is is that it's incredibly scared and its fight-or-flight mechanism has kicked in and it is being aggressive. Now, in the past some people would say, "That's a feral cat," whereas I own a cat and if you put her in a trap, gee, you would see some wild animal behaviours. This is still a highly socialised cat. What we try to say there is we would want to have a system where we do a behaviour assessment with a lot of pairs of very heavily trained eyes to say, "Okay, a cat has been brought in that has been trapped in Blacktown. We can triage whether or not this is a cat that's eventually going to come round and can be adopted, versus a cat that is never going to be safe and is potentially a health and safety risk to our staff," which we actually do see a lot.

GINA VEREKER: Could I just add to that? I agree, and it's about the time the cat spends with you. When we bring a cat in or someone comes in with a cat that they say is feral, it's about giving that cat time to settle down. Any cat, I agree, that's suddenly put in a cage is going to act like a feral cat, because it'll be petrified. In order to have the time to allow that cat to desensitise and relax so you can make that assessment, again, you need staff and you need resources and you need budget and areas for those cats. It comes down to budget with councils as to how much time they can put into this.

DIANA RAYMENT: Am I able to contribute to this conversation?

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely.

DIANA RAYMENT: I think there are two parts to this conversation, one being how much damage will any cat do when it's out and about in the environment. The key problem that we've got right now is we have too many cats. Everybody across the entire spectrum—the conservation people, the cat welfare people and the community—knows that we have too many cats and, essentially, what we need to do is drive the numbers down. The question becomes how do we drive the numbers down? The quickest way—my PhD is in companion animal behaviour in dog behaviour. I've worked for more than 20 years with these cats. There is some good, solid research in terms of how to actually tell the difference between an unsocialised cat and a cat with some degree of sociability by bringing it in, having humane housing and whatnot.

But the people who are caring for these cats already know, and this is the thing. If you want to know the quickest way to tell the difference between a cat who has some socialisation and the cat that doesn't, you go out into the community and you find the people who are socialising with the cat, rather than bringing it in and spending a minimum of three days. Now, having humane housing for cats—none of our codes of practice across the entirety of Australia meet the recommendations for humane housing of cats for short-term care. We also know that once cats are in care, you have a very limited amount of time before you start driving up the incidence of communicable disease. Flu, calicivirus, all of those things—as soon as you start stressing cats out, your rates go up, the likelihood

of infection across all the cats becomes increasingly likely, and you need to start euthanising cats because you've literally stressed them out to the point that they are going to show disease.

Now, there's a whole big discussion around what do we actually do with these cats, and how do we pull out the ones that could be adopted out. I want to come back to the point that the people who are already caring for these cats, as a general rule, know. If you can work with them, you can get the cats out that can be adopted, desex the cats that they have attachments to and keep them out of the system altogether, and get those population numbers down right. The aim of the game for everybody is to get the numbers down so that we have less cats who are actually predating on things. And, yes, for me those are the two core components of that question.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Given the time, I'd ask if everyone could take this one on notice. It's particularly directed at Blacktown. I note on page 6 in relation to paragraph (h) of our terms of reference, you talk about 39 of Victoria's 79 councils adopting specific regulations. I was wondering if you could tell us which councils are doing it best—or is it really a mix and match down there? You've indicated the six councils which have made specific changes, but is someone doing it who's really crash-hot? For Mr Robinson's sake, do they receive any particular subsidies or support from the Victorian State Government or elsewhere? Finally, what are the particular restrictions in relation to, say, the Companion Animals Act here or rental regulations that would restrict us from doing the same thing? Basically, I think it's a really good indication if someone else is doing it well. Can we do it as well? What would restrict us from doing that? Where's the money coming from?

KERRY ROBINSON: We would be pleased to give you some advice.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Can I just ask Tamworth—obviously you're closer to the front line of the spillover of your cat populations into TSRs, national parks and riparian zones, where they could have a greater impact on our native species. What interactions do you then have with National Parks and Wildlife Service and Local Land Services as far as your cat management—or does that burden solely fall on council?

GINA VEREKER: We have little that I'm aware of with Local Land Services or National Parks. We do have a lot—we work together with Landcare. Certainly some of the work we've done has been in conjunction with Landcare. But I would say certainly the highest majority falls on the local government to do what we can. We agree, and Landcare—we did work together on our policy about containment and desexing with Landcare, and the significant number and impact on wildlife is very clear from our perspective. I did want to add, if I can, that, when we talk about containment and containment will lead to more unwanted cats and cats being handed in to pounds, that would only be if there's only the law change and nothing goes with it. There's a lot of support that can go to that containment and should do—examples of how you do it.

That's where government could help with making it cheaper for those who can't afford it. I still think, and Tamworth still believes, containment is absolutely necessary, but the education and the assistance that goes with it so that the average person understands what is involved in that so it's easy—someone needs to set up a business and actually make money out of selling different sizes of enclosures. It's not that difficult and it's not that expensive. My husband built one for me for my cat—cost us $500. He built it. I would really recommend that you not just think that that containment has to work or cannot work because it's just a change to the law. There's a lot of education that would need to go with it but that can be effective.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: The main question I wanted to ask was around regulation—very similar to Mr Primrose. From your submissions, I take it that you are somewhat desperately calling on the State Government for that overarching, clear guiding framework with that head regulation, and then you think things will start falling into place and support the work councils are doing across the State. Am I correct in that assumption?

ROSALIE HORTON: One hundred per cent.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Mr Robinson, once you've got that, then that provides the mechanism effectively for proper application of resources to be able to implement.

KERRY ROBINSON: Yes. Councils will rank the merit of that expenditure against other demands in their community in the absence of adjustment to the rate cap. Effectively, I would ask in return: Which library are you asking has less hours in order to provide that additional service? Which park are you asking doesn't get mowed so that the community can't play its games on the weekend?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: And the proper response to that is "None. We will give you this resource to be able to implement these rules and laws and regulations."

KERRY ROBINSON: We look forward, as does Local Government NSW, to the State recanting its policy that local government isn't fit to manage its budget in consultation with its community.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for coming today. You did stay back a little later so we appreciate that. If there were any questions on notice, the secretariat will be in contact with you. There may be further questions as well from Committee members on notice.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Dr AMY LEE, NSW Division President, Australian Veterinary Association, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Dr NICK TAYLOR, Division Committee Member, Australian Veterinary Association, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Dr ROSEMARY ELLIOTT, President, Sentient, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales. I welcome our next witnesses. Does Sentient have a short opening statement they would like to make?

ROSEMARY ELLIOTT: Yes. I thank this Committee for initiating this inquiry with its broad terms of reference regarding the management of both domestic and feral cats. It is possible to care about the impact of cat predation on our wildlife without demonising cats by referring to them as pests or walking, stalking, ruthless killers, or by declaring war on them. This kind of language is not fitting for any public debate about best practice management. It is unscientific and potentially incites violence towards cats; yet it was openly used when the revised threat abatement program was announced in 2023.

Wherever and however cats live, they are sentient beings and it is our duty to treat them accordingly. It is also our duty to adopt an evidence-based approach to cat management, using a One Welfare framework. Faced with intakes that overwhelm the capacity of pounds and shelters—especially intakes of young kittens—high levels of euthanasia and convenience killing, limited foster care networks, emotional burnout of staff, and a veterinary shortage, the kind of systemic change we need is fully funded, targeted programs that support responsible cat ownership.

The shift in some jurisdictions towards mandated desexing, mandated cat containment, including cat-free suburbs, and the general stick versus carrot approach is placing greater pressure on our existing resources. We've heard evidence from RSPCA New South Wales and the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation that this approach also overlooks social equity issues, increases complaints about cats and leads to higher rates of cat abandonment and surrender, impoundment and killing—all this without any evidence of reducing cat predation on wildlife. Instead, Sentient advocates statewide government funding of the only proven solution to domestic cat overpopulation: high-intensity free desexing and microchipping programs targeted to low-income areas, along with community education. Successful examples include RSPCA New South Wales Keeping Cats Safe at Home program and the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation's community cat programs in Queensland. Both have published impressive results, with significantly decreased impoundments, euthanasia and killing rates and cat-related complaints.

Sentient also promotes the adoption of consistent definitions of cats, using the categories of feral, owned, semi-owned and unowned. The same compassionate approach should be extended to the management of feral cats. Instead of finding more gruesome methods of killing, none of which will ever provide a lasting solution, we propose the Government supports the development of novel nonlethal methods of managing these populations, such as through innovations in immunocontraception. The management of all cat populations will require a national plan. We believe the Australian Cat Action Plan produced by Getting 2 Zero is ideal due to its comprehensive list of low-cost actions that include anti-predation strategies to keep both cats and wildlife safe.

AMY LEE: Good morning, Chair, Committee members and fellow participants. We would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry. The AVA is the peak national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia, with members spanning the entire profession. I serve as president of the AVA New South Wales division, and I'm joined by Dr Nick Taylor today, who is an AVA New South Wales division committee member. Veterinarians have unique expertise in both the welfare of cats and broader implications of management strategies for animal health, public health and environmental outcomes. When considering cat population management, it is therefore imperative that veterinary input is embedded not only at the point of clinical care but also in policy development and program design. As mentioned by Dr Elliott, there are four distinct populations of cats in New South Wales. Each requires its own specific management approach. These populations include owned, semi-owned, unowned and feral cats.

The AVA emphasises the need for consistent classification of these cats. Mislabelling these groups leads to ineffective and sometimes harmful outcomes. Such a complex issue cannot be tackled without stakeholders using consistent definitions. Public education is essential to managing cat populations. Programs need to be well funded, strategically designed and regularly evaluated. They should be culturally inclusive, widely accessible and cover all aspects of responsible cat ownership from registration and desexing to containment and wildlife protection. However, education alone is not enough. It must be supported by improved access to desexing services to curb passive cat acquisition to help semi-owners take full responsibility for their cats and remove barriers to responsible pet ownership. Evidence-based, targeted cat desexing programs should be funded to reduce cat

overpopulation. Veterinarians are well placed to support cat management programs through desexing, receiving and identifying stray cats, public education and advising on containment.

However, our capacity to assist is limited without appropriate public funding. The AVA strongly advocates that all governments share legal and financial responsibility for cat care and management. Veterinary practices should not be expected to subsidise services that serve the broader public good. It is neither fair nor sustainable to place the financial burden of cat population management on private clinics. In fact, this contributes to poor mental health in veterinarians. Effective cat management relies on high-level collaboration between key stakeholders, strategic planning and ongoing monitoring. State and local governments should develop cat management plans, including legal frameworks and community education. Implementation should be accompanied by research to assess the outcomes and inform improvement. The AVA recommends reviving the national domestic cat working group to address domestic cat management as distinct from feral cat issues, and develop a national domestic cat management action plan.

Finally, we urge the New South Wales Government to implement recommendation 2 from the 2023 inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage, which was to amend the Companion Animals Act to ensure that local government authorities collect stray animals from veterinary practices. This should include the collection, in a timely manner, of unidentified cats presented to veterinary practices. In summary, the AVA believes that an effective, humane and evidence-based cat management program is achievable, but it will require a holistic approach. State governments, local councils, rescue organisations, wildlife experts, Indigenous communities and veterinarians each have a vital role to play. It is imperative, however, that their efforts be supported by adequate funding, a clear legislative framework and cohesive action. Thank you again. We look forward to your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you both for those opening statements. In the last session, we heard from councils that a significant number of cats aren't microchipped or registered, but are classified by many people as owned cats. Dr Elliott, if we were to bring in, say, mandatory cat containment laws, would we have a disaster of all these cats coming into councils and no way of those councils actually identifying where those cats actually live? Could we see cats being killed? And, realistically, before there's any kind of cat containment, is there a lot of work that would need to be done even before that to make sure people understand and action the legal requirements to have their cats microchipped and registered?

ROSEMARY ELLIOTT: Yes, definitely. I agree with your statement about this. We heard evidence in the first hearing in December, I think from RSPCA, that it's basically been a disaster in Victoria. Victoria have taken the stick approach. They've mandated cat containment. They've done this in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, and they've done it across the board. We know that we have a cost-of-living crisis. In Australia, we also have people who are already struggling financially and people in low socio-economic groups. We also have an accommodation and a housing crisis. There are many people who, faced with the threat of a fine, will abandon or surrender their cats. I can't remember the exact figure, but I think what's happened since the mandatory cat containment legislation was brought into place in Victoria is that the impoundment rate has increased by 68 per cent or 65 per cent—or something—from baseline.

You're going to get people who can't comply with this, and what do they do? As you've said, they'll take them to vet practices, which is not the right place to go; they'll take them to councils, but councils won't always take them; or they'll just dump them or try to rehome them to someone else, and then they're passing the issue on. These poor cats, if they're then caught, say, by a ranger or someone and they're not microchipped, they could even be mistaken for being potentially feral. It would be a disaster. We're not ready for that. I think we're definitely not ready for that. We need to work more with owners and we need to help owners. We need to educate them, particularly targeting those in those low socio-economic groups to help them with free microchipping, free desexing and set them up then.

The CHAIR: I'd also like to throw that question to the AVA to get a better understanding of the barriers that people who are from lower socio-economic groups and areas will face in regard to being able to contain cats.

AMY LEE: Dr Elliott has summarised this quite well, but I think one issue is that we have a lot of semi-owned cats. With semi-ownership, we know that people actually still feel they have a very strong bond to these cats—there has been a lot of research into that area—but they don't necessarily feel it's their responsibility to microchip or desex or do those other things associated with ownership. So I think we would absolutely see people go hands off and say, "I don't own that cat. Then I don't have anything to do with it in the face of potentially having to pay for a containment system." Perhaps they're renting. We know that we've got a high proportion of pet owners who are renters. Maybe they don't have permission to alter or modify that property, but also don't have any good research to show that cat containment works. As a general rule, we just don't have the data about that.

What we do know is that there may be a place for it, perhaps, where we know we've got a high population of threatened species. Maybe it's a new development. Maybe we introduce that at the outset for people. But we

know in New Zealand that, when they increased cat containment, they did that in a slow process incrementally and had better uptake. So I think Dr Elliot's right. We're just not ready for it at the moment here in Australia. If we try to slap that onto people in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, I think we're going to see what they have in Victoria, which is increased euthanasia and increased penalties that are putting more pressure on people who are actually good people trying to do the right thing, caring for this excess of cats that we have in our community.

The CHAIR: Dr Lee, in your submission you talked about the fact that we need further field studies to better understand the impact of cats. Can you expand on that and why we need further research to better understand what impact cats are potentially having on wildlife? I know we got some interesting evidence from WIRES in the last hearing that dogs are killing more wildlife than cats. They said that cats were probably much lower on their list of concerns in regards to protecting wildlife. I want to get the AVA's perspective on that as well.

AMY LEE: Yes, we agree with that. I think when it comes to knowing the impact that these cats are having on wildlife, the problem is we've got limited studies, and the studies we have have been working on predation estimates. I think, again, this was a New Zealand study—I'm happy to provide more details later; I just don't have them on me at the minute—where they actually put cameras on the cats. It was a significant number of cats. They showed that they were hunting insects and small reptiles and not necessarily getting to those populations of, say, mammals and things that were of more conservation concern, or even birds that were more conservation concern.

Some of the issues are we don't know what animals feral cats are hunting, as distinct from owned, semi-owned or unowned cats. We don't know what the effects on actual populations of wildlife are. We just have these predation estimates but they're not actually telling us what the real-life impact is. We really just don't have enough data around which subcategory of cat is doing what damage. And because we know that all of these subcategories need to be managed differently, there's no point in us, say, targeting pet cats if actually it's feral cats that are really more of a concern, or perhaps we need to be targeting both. We need more data to inform our response. Some of that has been having cameras actually on cats and some of that has been having camera traps, as well as measuring vulnerable populations of wildlife and seeing if we're making a difference with any changes that we implement.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: To the AVA, on page 14 of your submission, you talk about the success of the City of Gold Coast in reducing its euthanasia rate. You outline a number of recommendations there. I wonder if you could talk to that and tell us what the lessons are and what your recommendations are out of that, particularly relating to the key success factors in the last dot point on page 14.

AMY LEE: Basically it's the Getting to Zero campaign and Operation Wanted that we've spoken about on those pages. Basically it was doing pre-pubertal subsidised desexing. What we know is that, for instance, with semi-owned populations of cats, if we give free or subsidised desexing, it seems to encourage people to then take on full ownership of those cats. Oftentimes semi-owned populations are owned by people in lower socio-economic groups, so the cost of desexing or access to desexing and microchipping—things like that—are often reduced for those groups.

What they found there was that euthanasia reduced from 50 per cent on the Gold Coast to about 9.5 per cent, and that was over the space of 20 years or so. So we do see that that has a big impact, if we can drive owners—semi-owners—towards owning and looking after the cat in an appropriate fashion. That's an example of a targeted, low-cost or subsidised desexing program—looking for areas where we've got high euthanasia rates, high surrender or relinquishment rates and then devising a program around that. But it's not a standalone, just offer cheap desexing. You've got to use social media and engage schools. They really plugged that program within the community to make it a success.

I think the other thing, too, is looking at how that works, because we don't want the private veterinary practices in that area to be the ones that are subsidising the cost of that desexing. It does need to be funded through some other way because, as it is, most veterinarians charge far less for desexing than actually what those procedures are worth. They're already a loss leader for us. If they are doing desexing that's funded from elsewhere, that should be paid at market rates because they will also have an opportunity loss in doing those procedures where they can't do other, probably higher paying, procedures.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I have a couple of questions for the AVA. Surely in your profession, you come across animal owners that you look at and think, "You should not be looking after this animal. You're not suitable to manage this this animal"?

AMY LEE: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Because there seems to be this inference that everyone has a right to have a cat wherever they live, whatever situation they're in. I struggle to come to terms with that.

AMY LEE: It is difficult. That's definitely an ethical dilemma that I would say every veterinarian, no matter what species you're treating, will come across at some point. I think that veterinarians, as a profession, really try to stay out of judgement, because it doesn't help us help the animal. Sometimes those cases are cases where people just lack the education and once they have the tools and the education, they do a lot better. I actually think that's the majority of the cases. It's very rare to have a person who is truly uncaringly negligent. Absolutely, it happens, but I think a lot of it is lack of education.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: There seems to be a lot of effort going in to helping people that didn't actively choose to have cats in the first place. It then ends up there being effort and resources going into them becoming responsible pet owners, where they're not people that chose to have cats in the first place.

AMY LEE: That's most of us. I never chose to have a cat, but I used to have three—it kind of comes with the profession; you get sick of putting down strays after a while—and that's what happens to the general public. They will have a cat that comes into their yard all the time. They take it to a vet clinic or a pound. It's not microchipped. What do they do with it? There are no rescues to take it, the pounds aren't taking them and they don't want it to suffer so they start feeding it. We do have a lot of data to say that at least 65 per cent of those people actually develop quite strong bonds with those cats, and that the bonds are comparable to owned cats. So even though they don't want to have them, they actually do form a very strong attachment to them, which is why we've had success with these programs where we push those people further along the ownership process and we remove barriers to that.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: When you say we should have cat management programs in place, surely one of the goals of that is to have less unowned, unchipped cats in the system?

AMY LEE: Yes, and a way of doing that is to get those semi-owned cats chipped and desexed and getting people who are already semi-owning them to take on their ownership.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Are we not better going further upriver so those semi-owned cats aren't there in the first place, or unowned cats aren't there in the first place?

AMY LEE: That's the long-term goal. I think this is the issue with this. It's such a complex problem that one solution is not going to fix it. We need to come at this from multiple angles. Some of that is looking at the stuff that's upriver, and desexing is obviously a huge part of that, but you've also got to look at those other factors as well, like how do we get these guys out of the point where they can be reproducing. A lot of these cats aren't desexed so actually targeting these semi-owned cats will reduce cat populations over time but for us to really make a dent in cat populations, we would have to desex over 75 per cent of sort of strays—semi-owned, unowned or feral cats—over a number of years, for us to actually even make a dent. We need to be looking for the lower hanging fruit in the meantime and making plans for that longer term strategy as well.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: In the submission, you say toxic baits should only be a last resort. Given the extinction rates we're seeing at the moment and the wipe-out of some of our native mammals, when do we hit that last resort? Surely we're there already?

AMY LEE: There's a number of problems with the baits. I think one of the biggest concerns is that 1080 is still the most common. The problem is it's—

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'm not talking about the efficacy of the thing; I'm talking about your comment that we use them as a last resort. What do you see as last resort? How many more extinctions do we need to see before we get to that point of last resort?

AMY LEE: We haven't got good evidence about cats contributing to extinctions. We know that dogs actually have far more significance when it comes to predating on native wildlife, and particularly wildlife of significance, so I don't think we're there yet to be specifically lethally targeting cats. However, it's case by case. If you've got a huge feral cat population next to a very vulnerable, threatened species, that might be a very good time to bring in your lethal control, so long as it's done in a way that looks at animal welfare, and 1080 doesn't do that. It's about targeted and specific. I think we also have to be very careful about public perception because we know that the community is very caring towards cats, so any lethal measures will be met with public backlash to a degree, particularly shooting, for instance. We know that never tends to go down very well with the public.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: This suggestion that getting cats chipped is a big impost—as of 1 January this year every sheep and goat in New South Wales has to be chipped as well. Surely, if someone wants to have a cat, one way of proving that they're a responsible-ownership owner is to get that chip. Surely that's not that big an impost. I'm happy for that to be answered in the room as well.

AMY LEE: From our perspective, I guess it just depends on that person's socio-economic status. I mean, $50 to some people is nothing and $50 is probably cheap for a chip. You know, $50 for someone else could be a big portion of their weekly budget. It's looking at where we can remove those barriers to get it.

The CHAIR: Dr Elliott, do you have anything further? I am not sure if you missed the question itself. I think it was about whether or not people should be required to have microchips, is that right?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes. All sheep and goats in New South Wales need to be chipped to prove that you are a responsible manager of those animals. If you are going to be a responsible manager of a cat, surely getting them chipped is the least that we could ask of that person.

ROSEMARY ELLIOTT: It's very important. It's for their safety as well, definitely. I think that's what the AVA and Sentient will be promoting, which is we support people to get that done. Some people can't afford it. If we can support them to do it, we're talking about a minority of the human population, but those people may be caring for seven cats in terms of a semi-owned sense. If you can support them and get the microchip done, that's part of the solution. I just wanted to follow up on Dr Lee's fantastic answer and just add that, regarding the toxic baits, they affect wildlife. Even the less dreadful one, which is PAPP, that they're using in Foxecute and Dogabait, these have affected bandicoots and quolls and others. It's not as simple as they'll just take out the cats. They will take out the wildlife as well, and there's quite a bit of evidence now for 1080 being found in birds of prey because they've been eating carrion who were killed from 1080. There are more reasons than cat welfare to avoid the toxic baits.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: My question really is for you, Dr Lee. I admit to being very confused by some of the evidence that you've given because it sounded as if, to me, you were arguing that we don't really have a problem with cats killing our native wildlife, and that stands against everything else that I've read in terms of submissions. If the view of the AVA is that cats are not a problem for our native wildlife, what is the problem that we're trying to fix? Why would you have that view that seems so out of step with all the other evidence we've received?

AMY LEE: To clarify what I was saying, it's not that the AVA believes that we don't have a problem with cats killing wildlife at all. It's just that we don't have great data around what population of cats are killing wildlife. I think my point earlier was more that we don't have solid data about cats causing extinction. We too have been involved in, I think, 20 out of the 47 extinctions of species in New South Wales that we've had since settlement. I'm not arguing that cats don't kill wildlife at all. It's just more that if we're going to make blanket statements about cats being the problem, we just need to be careful that we're got the research to back things up and justify the movements that we take because we don't have great data at the moment. I think a starting point is let's get that data. Let's find out exactly what impact cats are having because then we have a baseline that we can measure from. So, yes, I am not at all saying that cats don't cause a problem, but it's more like let's quantify that problem. Let's find out exactly what we're dealing with so that we know which populations of cats we need to be tackling and how.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: But what extinctions do we risk while we're waiting to collect that data?

AMY LEE: Obviously we don't want any further extinctions, but it doesn't mean that there aren't other things that we can be doing at that same time. This doesn't have to be a try one thing and put everything on the backburner. I suspect this is going to be multi-pronged and lots of things happening at the one time, and one of those things should be collecting data.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Other than collecting data, what's the top thing that the AVA recommends we should be doing with respect to our cat population?

AMY LEE: I think the top things we can look at are getting that terminology standardised. Let's get everyone agreeing what these populations of cats actually are between our owned, semi-owned—

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Sorry, Dr Lee: How does standardising technology protect against extinctions?

AMY LEE: It's starting at the beginning. If everyone's not talking about the same problem, how will you solve that problem? You've got lots and lots of different—

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: It seems as if you're suggesting the problem has been overblown or doesn't really exist.

AMY LEE: Not at all. That's a hundred per cent not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is there is a problem, but, you know, if you have a problem, is the key thing not to find out what question am I solving? What problem am I solving? Right now, we know we've cats killing wildlife. We've got cats being nuisances. We've cats suffering

ill welfare because they're not being properly looked after. But what we need to know is are we all speaking the same language here. That's the first starting point. The second point is getting a national cat management plan going so that we've got all States and Territories talking the same language and then, at the same time as they're doing those things, then getting all those key stakeholders to be having high-level discussions with each other about where do we go. Is it simultaneously doing public education and encouraging semi-owners to acquire their animals at the same time as looking at lethal options for vulnerable biological—

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: So your top recommendation is we talk a lot more between the States.

AMY LEE: That's the starting point, yes.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: How long should that starting point take until it's complete?

AMY LEE: I guess that's for the Government to decide that side of things, but I think that getting everybody working together more cohesively—because what we've seen at the moment and actually in evidence in this hearing is that we've got lots of people with lots of different ideas. Quick fixes are very appealing. They're not going to work in this situation because, if they did, then we would have already solved the issue, and we haven't. We need to look at the complexity of the issue and get all those stakeholders discussing that. I would say that, out of that, we would probably get some wonderful ideas that would be easily actionable quite quickly. We've already seen some great models of that from the Gold Coast council, from New Zealand and other places. We don't need to reinvent the wheel, but we do need to be cohesive in how we're acting.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Thank you. I'm conscious of time. I just have one last question, perhaps to everybody. We've heard a lot of discussion about the burden on people of low socio-economic groups caring responsibly for cats, which raises other issues. We've also heard about the difficulties of cat containment if you are living in premises that you don't own. Is cat containment or the ability to provide a contained space for pets something which should be considered in the design of social and affordable housing?

ROSEMARY ELLIOTT: I think that's an excellent idea. I think that's a great solution because we don't want to criminalise people for being poor. I'd also like to talk about the whole one-welfare approach that the veterinary profession is very committed to. The people who are feeding cats who are just hanging around are doing it out of compassion. I would argue that they will make very good owners because they have compassion. If you can work with people and start with where they're at, the goal, obviously, is to get those cats contained at home, definitely. But the home, as you said, for many people, social housing is hard to get into and you have no choice about what you're given. You may have no option of how to contain a cat in that setting, so I think that's a great solution.

I also want to follow up on something from the last question about the frustration that people are having with what sounds like a slow approach. We're on the same page as the AVA in terms of the veterinary profession works in a scientific way, so we need data of what mess have we got now. We need that data so then we can track it, like the community cat programs up in Queensland. They started out with a certain percentage of euthanasia and impoundments. After three years they decreased the cat intakes by 60 per cent, the euthanasia by 80 per cent and the cat-related complaints to local council by 39 per cent.

That's the sort of data that tells you it is worth spending money on these programs. But until we have the information about the exact impact of all categories of cats on wildlife, we still know what we should be doing, and we can start doing that. That includes the targeted desexing programs. I would like to argue that we should be looking at immunocontraception, because there have been recent advances, and it would be an awful lot easier than actually trapping, sedating, desexing and releasing. I think we've got some really good directions where we can go, and that needs to be communicated to people like yourselves who are very concerned about the impact on our native animals.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Following on from what the Hon. Susan Carter was asking, I want to go to this claim that the science or the data is not particularly reliable or strong. I'm still not quite sure what the proposition there is. Dr Lee, you mentioned that cats are thought to have contributed to at least 20 of the extinctions that we've experienced in Australia to date. Do you accept that's half of the extinctions we've experienced?

AMY LEE: Yes. It's close to half—47 extinctions. That's what it is thought to be. However, I've also read conflicting research to that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Are you able to supply the Committee with the conflicting research that you've read around those claims?

AMY LEE: Yes, I can take that on notice.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you question in any way the research or the veracity or basis of the compilation of research contained in *Cats in Australia: Companion and Killer* by Sarah Legge? I think it was done in collaboration with another scientist. Are you aware of their work?

AMY LEE: I am on the surface but not in detail. I think we quoted it in our submission as well.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I think so. I think that's fairly recognised as being some extremely reliable data, science and field work, showing the correlation and the direct risk, harm and cause of native animal death through cat predation. I'm curious about whether you're suggesting that that data is not a sound basis for members of this Committee or any government agency or regulator to be basing regulation upon. I'd love it if you were happy to take on notice and provide the Committee more of a basis to understand that proposition that we don't have reliable data in relation to what has become quite commonly known—that cats are an enormous threat to wildlife and the survival of certain populations.

AMY LEE: I will take that on notice, but I think that the authors of that 2020 paper by Legge did actually acknowledge the limitations of their own work. If you look at page six of our submission, we have noted in there that, although the Australian studies differ in methods, duration and sample size, and they've not sampled exhaustively across Australian urban, peri-urban and rural environments, collectively, there is still that substantial research effort and sampling from many locations. But they've noted there that there are some limits in the Australian studies in that they're not standardised and they haven't sampled a wide range of different environments. The other thing they note is that detrimental impacts to wildlife populations from pet cat predation have been reported from Australia, but the evidence is patchy. They've also said that the evidence of wildlife population declines as a result of pet cat predation are highly suggestive but the studies are few, especially from Australia. Even in that paper that you're referencing, that's what I'm talking to: It is just that we've got limited data.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I know that part of the ethics of that research is to put forward the limitations, which they do very well. But I wasn't actually referring to the paper as such. I was referring to the publication—the book that has been put together as a compilation of all of the research and evidence. But I would appreciate it if you could provide us with the evidence that you're suggesting counters research or puts into doubt that the data we have got is not reliable.

AMY LEE: Maybe it shouldn't be phrased that way—that the data we have isn't reliable. It's more that we have limited data. That's probably more to the point of what I was saying. It's not questioning the data that we have. We've got some data there. But we just haven't got a breadth of data which would be really valuable in not only assessing what the problem is but also measuring our outcomes as we move along this path. Does that make sense? It's not questioning that we've got reliable data as such; it's just saying that we don't have enough data, and we could do with more to substantiate things better.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: This is for anybody who would like to answer. Could you elaborate on the notion that euthanising cats is somehow undesirable? I'm speaking about any cats from a veterinary perspective.

AMY LEE: From the perspective of a private practitioner, which I also am, and also from an AVA standpoint, there is concern about the number of euthanasias that need to be done of unwanted cats and kittens. Twenty years ago, when I graduated, I would walk into a room of healthy puppies and kittens and kill them all, doing contract work for the RSPCA, because they just didn't have a place to put them. They didn't have foster carers. I also used to work for RSPCA Yagoona back in the day. But even as a private practitioner, we get cats in all the time. They won't be taken by a pound. There's no room for them in rescue shelters. What do we do with them? A lot of the time, you end up euthanising. It has a huge emotional burden on the veterinary profession, and it puts us in a lot of ethical dilemmas. Is this owned? Is it semi-owned? Do we need to contact someone about this one? What do we do? So there is that, but others might have other thoughts on that.

ROSEMARY ELLIOTT: That's a very real issue. I'd like to support that. The veterinary profession has an extremely high suicide rate, and that would be one of the things that feeds into it. I don't even use the term euthanasia for what I think is convenience killing. It's convenient for us to put these animals down because we have nowhere to home them, which is probably why, in my opening statement, I talked about euthanasia/convenience killing. Whilst it is done by vets in a very humane way and the animals are not suffering, there is the broader ethical issue that we are depriving them of their lives through things that we've not done well as a society in terms of looking after them. I don't think that's a fair thing. I also understand that if you were going to try to kill them, you'd need to kill 75 per cent or 80 per cent of them, probably every year for 10 years. You're not going to be able to do that, particularly with feral cats. They're very hard to find. They're shy; they're hidden. They won't come out easily to a cage to take a bait and, if they do, they'll never come back again. I think we have to move beyond the killing and think about more sophisticated and streamlined approaches.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I am more curious if there is an issue amongst vets and the professional bodies that represent vets in relation to whatever you want to call it—euthanasia or convenience killing. Do you think there might be a place for a different body or a different group of people who are very willing to undertake a public interest euthanasia service for the purpose of trying to control cats for the benefit of wildlife, remembering that there are all of the ethics about the cruel killing of wildlife by cats? Has there been any consideration of, or any looking into, a specialist service where those individuals responsible for undertaking the act or the task are doing it as part of a well-informed strategic program where they believe they're contributing to the benefit of the outcomes that takes it away from the pressure of, as you say, private practice vets that are working more with domestic animals on a daily basis?

AMY LEE: I think we have to be careful because euthanasia is a highly skilled service, and I think it is one that in certain settings should only be delivered by veterinarians. I know that in shelter situations you can have other staff that are qualified to do that. I do think you'd struggle to find any group of people that would be really happy or that comfortable about taking lives on a long-term basis. I think, psychologically, that does have an impact over time, even in resilient people. When you look at vets that work in welfare organisations and shelters, they believe they're euthanising for the greater good.

They're doing their jobs, they're highly professional, and they've often been doing it for a long time, but these things just take their toll. I don't know that necessarily singling out one particular group to do it would be a great idea. I don't know that I'd love the idea of anyone who enjoys it doing it, or that is really uncaring doing it. I think also we just need to look at the skill that's involved in that. These days with euthanasia, even if we're euthanising strays, we give them drugs to sedate them beforehand so that they don't feel anything and all the rest of it. Even if they're not owned, we try to do that in a very ethical way.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Just to the question, has anybody in the veterinary professional bodies looked into that as an option, having a strategic specialist service to take that burden or that pressure away from vets who simply can't or don't want, for all the good reasons, to do the work of euthanising cats that are not homed or looked after?

ROSEMARY ELLIOTT: Euthanasia through injection is a veterinary procedure and it will always remain an act of veterinary science.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I'm still saying that they would be qualified. For example, we have wildlife vets now that don't do any domestic animals or care for them. We've got wildlife hospitals opening. I'm just curious as to whether your organisations or your professional bodies have questioned your members or anybody else? If this was a public interest need and the Government was supporting it, and there was special investment involved, have you surveyed or looked to your members to see whether there is, for want of a better term, a niche for that kind of work?

ROSEMARY ELLIOTT: I'm not aware of it, but what I do want to say is you've already got the DPI out there with guns, traps, poisons. So there are cats being—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I think it's something different I'm referring to.

ROSEMARY ELLIOTT: Okay. I'm not aware of it.

The CHAIR: Because we are over time, if you would both like to take that question on notice to provide further details, you're more than welcome to. We have run out of time but thank you all so much for your time and your evidence that you gave today. It has been appreciated. There may be some more questions on notice from Committee members, and the secretariat will be in touch with those.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr STEPHEN ALBIN, Chief Executive Officer, Animal Welfare League NSW, sworn and examined

Ms NELL THOMPSON, Coordinator, Getting 2 Zero, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I now welcome our next witnesses and thank them for giving their time to come and give evidence today. Does the Animal Welfare League have a short opening statement?

STEPHEN ALBIN: Thank you, Chair and Committee members, for the opportunity to contribute to this important environmental and animal welfare policy issue. Animal Welfare League NSW has the widest coverage across the State, with 20 branches resourced by dedicated volunteers. All of those branches deal with community cat management and cat rehoming. As outlined in our submission, we strongly believe that managing cat populations is best achieved through a balanced, community-driven approach rather than mandatory cat containment laws. Wildlife predation is a major environmental issue. However, mandatory cat containment may well deliver unintended policy outcomes.

Our position is based on four key points. Making containment for all owned cats mandatory is disproportionate and challenging to implement. Instead, we argue that voluntary containment, supported by education and incentives, will be far more effective. Large-scale desexing programs are supported as the most humane and effective way to control cat populations. We propose robust community cat management initiatives that can enlist the help of volunteers to responsibly manage semi-owned and unowned cat populations. We propose greater education for cat owners about responsible pet ownership, including the need for mental stimulation for indoor cats, ensuring that voluntary containment is practical and beneficial for cat welfare.

Our final point is this: Instead of a one-size-fits-all law, we suggest a flexible strategy that targets feral cats in key conservation areas and supports low-income communities with subsidised programs. This will reduce the risk of unintended outcomes such as increased semi-owned and unowned and feral cat populations, and overburdened shelters. Cat containment does not fully account for the varied impacts of different cat typologies—the owned versus the semi-owned or unowned and feral—or the social and economic challenges for pet owners. Any policy should carefully consider and examine the economic and social environmental issues associated with it.

Pet owners have never done it tougher, with rising costs for pet care forcing some owners to give up their pets. Shelters are full as we manage more surrenders, with lower demand for pet adoption. Mandatory containment could have negative economic and social outcomes with no meaningful environmental benefits. I'd urge the Committee to consider flexible containment models and support desexing programs. By supporting voluntary measures and targeted interventions we can achieve better outcomes for both native wildlife and cat welfare. It will also develop high levels of community support.

The CHAIR: Ms Thompson, did you have a short opening statement?

NELL THOMPSON: Yes, thank you. I acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land and pay my respects to Elders past and present, and any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people with us today. Getting 2 Zero is a national program offering free, remote and onsite support to local governments, non-profits and community groups. It aims to keep people and pets together while improving outcomes for lost and homeless animals across Australia. G2Z advocates for community-driven solutions to community problems. Companion animal welfare and management were once separate sectors. Welfare arose to protect animals, while management addressed public health and safety concerns related to strays and dangerous animals.

Over time, shifting values has brought these sectors closer together, with a growing emphasis on community expectations and harm prevention. Animal welfare groups now recognise that better management involves companion animal welfare, requiring a balance between animal and community needs. Despite differing origins, both sectors are moving towards a shared evolving strategy as community services. This inquiry is not just about welfare management or enforcement; it's about people and their connections to cats, ensuring disadvantage does not create more disadvantage.

In the last 20 years, academic interest in these sectors has surged, linking them to human health and social science. With a robust evidence base, policies and programs can now be developed more effectively, moving beyond outdated practices. Cat management, typically handled by local governments and non-profits, remains under-resourced for prevention and support strategies. Governments can help by supporting councils to implement community engagement and support programs that will improve cat welfare, and management outcomes that are in line with social expectations and that also provide environmental benefits. Animal management is a community service that needs investment. G2Z recognises that management of domestic cats that are neither fully owned nor

living independently of humans is a significant challenge for animal management teams. Enforcement models have not been shown to be successful in reducing cat populations or their impacts.

We encourage the Government of New South Wales to adopt an approach to the cat management conundrum that includes progress-oriented methodology that allows progress towards the objectives while maintaining the flexibility to respond to new information and emerging challenges, data-driven best practices that are actually working in Australian communities today, and fiscal responsibility. According to Animal Welfare Victoria, average costs for a council to provide impound services for a single cat sits at around $516 per cat. Given that an estimated 30,000 cats are impounded annually in Victoria, that could equate to $15.5 million in costs per year, even when cats are not suitable for rehoming, are not held in care and are euthanised. This approach is irresponsible, unethical and ineffective. Let's work to do things a different way.

The CHAIR: Thank you both for your submissions. I'll start with a quick question to Mr Albin. I know that you work quite closely with a lot of pounds and councils across New South Wales, and I know the Animal Welfare League often takes in a lot of those animals and helps rehome them. What do you think would happen in terms of impoundments and euthanasia rates if we were to follow Victoria and adopt these kinds of mandatory cat containment laws?

STEPHEN ALBIN: What will happen with mandatory cat containment will be—and I heard some of the other discussions. I think what we've seen on the ground here is that there are a lot of people that actually feed cats and look after cats. They don't want to own them, one, because of registration costs; two, because of microchips; three, because of the liabilities or potential liabilities of having a cat roaming and found by a ranger. I think the mandatory cat containment will actually make the problem worse, not better, because you'll have more unowned cats. They'll be out there in the community breeding, often not desexed, not microchipped and causing chaos.

Cat populations grow exponentially. This isn't a little problem. By actually bringing in a mandatory cat containment policy, you can have perverse policy outcomes. That's what may very well happen here in New South Wales if we do the same thing. Now, I'll be asked whether there's any evidence in Victoria. I haven't seen any about what is actually going on on the ground. They're very hard to monitor. We're actually running programs here in New South Wales and some pilot programs to see how effective community cat management could be at managing populations like that.

The CHAIR: What are you seeing from those programs?

STEPHEN ALBIN: We are seeing exactly what I've just—a lot of people don't want to own. We've been to Aboriginal communities as well, on the far South Coast. A lot don't want to own the animals. They don't want to take responsibility, but they do want to feed them, and often they do want to have companionship. We're actually seeing a willingness to get involved in our programs, and we're actually owning the animals. We're taking these animals in, owning them, desexing them and paying for that, and it seems to be working relatively well. The best example I've got is the Campus Cats program. One of our board members, who has already presented to this group, has made a material difference over about 13 years at the University of New South Wales, bringing a pretty significant population right down. That's the best evidence that I can see.

The CHAIR: We've seen some evidence throughout the inquiry, and from some of the submissions, that some of these Victorian councils that introduced them later dropped them because they couldn't actually enforce them. They didn't have the funding available. They said that suddenly every time there was a cat on the street, the council was expected to take action on those cats. And, of course, our pounds are already overfull. A lot of these councils in Victoria had nowhere to actually take those cats. Even Local Government NSW, when they gave evidence on the last hearing day, said that they weren't really aware of any council that had the funding or the pound facilities available to enforce those kinds of mandatory containment laws in New South Wales. What do you think would happen if a council was to pass these laws when there's no pound facilities and funding available?

STEPHEN ALBIN: If a council passed—and my local council has just gone in this direction where I live, but policing it is a real issue. If you look at some of the local government pound statistics that are issued every year, you'll see some pounds with zero cats. The reason they have zero cats is they're not enforcing their existing—well, cats are free to roam. They're not actually dealing with any of these cat issues in their communities. What I would say is that a very effective way would be to actually have these community cat management programs in place in local areas to manage the cat populations rather than employ more rangers. I don't know how much money local government spends on rangers, but it would be very difficult to enforce.

The CHAIR: I'm happy for this question to go to Ms Thompson as well. Are you aware of any research that suggests that cat containment works?

NELL THOMPSON: No, none at all.

STEPHEN ALBIN: I actually asked ChatGPT to write something for me, and it wasn't even convinced. But then I tried to find the source, and I couldn't find the source. I'm not sure of the extent to which it works. I couldn't give you an answer on that.

The CHAIR: Ms Thompson, did you have anything?

NELL THOMPSON: No, there's no evidence at all. Most other countries—I don't even know any other countries that have tried to implement it, because it's not effective. In Victoria, it has been—we've had mandatory containment here for almost 20 years, and those councils that are sticking with it are still not seeing any improvement in intake, in complaints, in cat population numbers or anything like that.

The CHAIR: What does work? What should this inquiry be recommending? If mandatory cat containment doesn't work, where is there some—and we have heard that we need a lot more research and evidence. But what actions can we take now to reduce the homeless cat populations that we're currently seeing?

STEPHEN ALBIN: Do you want to go first, Nell?

NELL THOMPSON: Sure. The evidence is on the ground here in Australia. We know that microtargeting works. If we follow the model that we have in practice in some communities around Australia, then we have the evidence on the ground. Actually, we don't even need to do more research on it. We have the evidence; we know it works. It's significantly more impactful than any other cat management strategy that has been rolled out across Australia historically. The costs for that are also significantly cheaper than what a lot of States—Victoria for one—are spending on cat management. I think we have the answer. It's a problem that we have to approach bite by bite. There's not a one size fits all. We need to look at each community and look at the situation—what people need, what the cats need, what the community needs—and target accordingly. Looking at our intake data is vitally important.

STEPHEN ALBIN: Our position, Chair—and we've seen it works in foster situations as well, with our animals—is voluntary containment over mandates. I try to keep my cat in all the time, but I can't keep it in 100 per cent of the time. But people should be made aware of the potential issues with cats and wildlife. So make it voluntary. Make people aware of the impacts of their cat being outside, for instance, at night. Focus on desexing and community cat management. We think that's really important. We spend more than $1.6 million a year of our own money on our companion animal desexing scheme. We are starting to invest in community cat management programs and enhance public education to actually get the cat owners to understand responsible pet ownership—and a lot of them do—including the need for mental stimulation for cats. The final one is targeted and flexible measures that target, if there is a problem with feral cats, the feral cats adjacent to national parks. We understand that. Overall, that shouldn't be leached out into the other cat typologies.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: It seems these unowned cat colonies are justified in that they feel a companionship role with some people who end up feeding them and looking after them because they feel compassion for the cats. If that companionship was a need, isn't that better being met by going to one of your pounds and getting a cat rather than adopting stray cats? Surely, the utopic view is that these cat colonies aren't there.

STEPHEN ALBIN: It is. That's a very good question. It would be great if they weren't there. There are people that will feed them and look after these community cats, and they do get companionship out of them. I'm not a vet, but there are multiple litters a cat can have in a year. If those animals and those community cats aren't desexed—and we do a lot of it around Western Sydney as well, especially in very poor areas, where people can't afford the ownership of cats but will feed cats scraps in colonies and look after them. I think the important thing—and utopic—would be that we wouldn't have any of them. But to start, we need to make a real dent in it by ensuring that many of those animals that are being fed are desexed.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Wouldn't it be better if they were removed altogether? With the effort that goes into catching, desexing and returning an animal, wouldn't you be able to, euphemistically, remove several more of them than that?

STEPHEN ALBIN: That's your euphemism. You mean kill them.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes, absolutely.

STEPHEN ALBIN: No. I'm from the Animal Welfare League. If you think I'm going to be supporting killing cats, you've got to be crazy. Pardon my language.

NELL THOMPSON: Can I offer some insight there, please?

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely.

NELL THOMPSON: In Victoria we have been doing exactly what you've been suggesting, Mr Barrett. We have been rounding up cats and killing them from various locations around the State since we've had cat management in place, which is 30-odd years. I'm lucky enough to have been in this field since that time, and I've seen that it actually hasn't done anything. Our numbers show that it has not done anything. The science of it is that, when you remove a group of cats from an area that has resources that can support cats, more cats will move in from surrounding areas. We have been doing catching and killing and we can tell you that it doesn't work. We need to look at other solutions. Another solution is a progressive approach where we desex the members of that community cat population so that they're not breeding and they're not contributing to the population but, similarly, they're not allowing other cats in. Obviously, that area needs to be monitored. We can't just do an action and then leave. Biology doesn't work like that, I'm sorry.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: But that cat is going to die eventually, isn't it? At some point somebody is going to replace it. All you're doing is prolonging the period before it dies.

NELL THOMPSON: When you say somebody is going to replace it, what does that mean?

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: You're saying that killing them doesn't work because they get replaced by other animals.

NELL THOMPSON: Intact animals coming in from neighbouring areas.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: If you desex an animal and put it back there, when it gets hit by a car or eaten by a dog or dies of ill health, it's then going to get replaced by another intact animal. So it's the same outcome.

NELL THOMPSON: The goal is that we don't just do one area and that we progressively work through all of the areas. We've seen through the evidence that we have so far that the more desexed animals that we have in a location, the less entire animals we have in a location and the less population replacement there is. That's how it all works. If we desex them then they can't breed.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: But if the argument is that we can't be killing cats because they then create a vacuum that other cats will rush in to fill, then all desexing is doing is surely delaying that for a generation, when exactly the same process will occur.

NELL THOMPSON: That's what I'm saying. We can't just do an action in an area and then turn our backs on it. We have to continue desexing. Say we've identified one area such as the University of New South Wales, which has been mentioned earlier, and all of the cats there are desexed. When new cats come in, they are then desexed as well, and the goal would be for that program to expand out from there so that that desexing program is expanded out and there are less cats to breed, and so you reduce the population.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: But you've still got cats who could be targeting native wildlife in that process.

NELL THOMPSON: Absolutely. You will find that the evidence actually shows—

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: We are trying to weigh up killing cats or killing wildlife.

NELL THOMPSON: That's an ethical discussion for another day. But I think what you'll find the evidence—

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: No, it's this Committee's discussion. That's exactly what this Committee is really considering, and that's the nub of it—how we do that. It is today's discussion.

NELL THOMPSON: There are various factors that come into cat management. Environmental impact is one of them, yes. There are lots of others as well. But I think what you'll find is that the research shows us that cats that are desexed have less of a need for nutrition. They don't need to actually eat as much. They're not going to hunt as much and they're not reproducing. That is an impost on a biological being. There are lots of benefits.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Can I just stop you there? Is it an impost on male cat reproduction?

NELL THOMPSON: Yes, absolutely, it is. It's significant.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I have one last question, perhaps to both of you, if you're able to answer it. It's really about resources. I think I heard a figure of $1.6 million, was it, that's being spent on desexing cats?

STEPHEN ALBIN: Yes.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: And we've heard figures about supporting people who can't afford to own community cats with vet care and microchipping and things like that. The suggestion, certainly, that has been put to us by other witnesses is that this needs to be a community responsibility. What I'm trying to work out is, if the

costs of microchipping and desexing for people who can't afford those costs are borne by the community, then doesn't that cost then end up back on those people, but as a transfer cost, because of higher taxes or higher charges or less services, or as the transfer cost onto other people who would like to own a cat but find that they cannot because of the higher taxes or charges that they're being paid? Where do we find the resources to deal with this problem?

STEPHEN ALBIN: That is a good question. Anything that you do in this regard is a transfer cost. What we're doing at the moment is we're using people's donations to pay for this. It will be very difficult to design a program, but it's not impossible. The way we do it is that we issue vouchers and we negotiate with the vets as to the price. I saw Amy Lee before. She was saying that vets do discounted desexing, and they do and they are great. We deal with vets, we give vouchers to low-income people with pension cards and I think we've done something like—I can't give you a figure, but it's significant—in the thousands per year on this.

The lower income people contribute, we contribute, the vets contribute and it works. If you change that to a government system, does it change the incentives in that value chain? That's why you've got a good question. I can't answer that. The vets may choose to charge more. We may choose not to put as much money in. We will, I'd say, but we may choose that as well. That's a fair enough call. I think that you would need to investigate some of the incentives that are in place to ensure the Government gets value for money if it does get involved in this space.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: It would be a shame that a family can't afford to buy a cat because they're paying higher taxes.

STEPHEN ALBIN: That's right.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: It would be unfortunate if it was structured in that way.

STEPHEN ALBIN: I fully understand what you're saying.

NELL THOMPSON: I think we're largely paying for this problem. Cat management is the biggest problem we face nationally in companion animal management. We're all paying for it in one way or another. I think if we can investigate all of the various departments that are involved in cat management or responding to any cat-related issues, the funds can be found. If a microtargeted desexing approach is taken on board, it will be less than what other States have been required to find. They've managed to just kill them and catch them and not get anywhere.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Mr Albin, I appreciate very much and recognise the compassionate work that you and your organisation do. I know it's such a longstanding organisation. I'm just curious—you mentioned your cat—does your cat kill wildlife?

STEPHEN ALBIN: I couldn't answer. I've never seen any, but I can't tell you whether they do or they don't if it is outside. Primarily I think it wouldn't. It has a toy mouse; it plays with that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I know you were saying that you would never advocate for the euthanising of any cat. I'm just curious about the regulatory regime around that. It's unlawful to kill native wildlife. There are penalties involved and there are regulations. But we have cats, and we don't contain them and we don't know whether they're killing wildlife. I'm just curious about that void between one reality and another reality. How are we to reconcile that? When we're getting evidence that, for whatever reasons, we just can't advocate for the euthanising of an animal in a humane way to try to prevent the harm and the welfare impacts that that animal has on another animal, I'm just trying to—

STEPHEN ALBIN: I'm not going to get into a moral discussion about which animal's life is better than another's.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: It wasn't moral; it's about the regulatory regimes. That's what I'm asking.

STEPHEN ALBIN: What I will explain—and I think that vet was trying to get to it before. If you actually see the impact on humans from euthanising these companion animals, these cats—semi-owned and unowned—it is massive. I interviewed someone for a job once, and they'd been a lethalist. There's a job for people to euthanise cats; they're called lethalists. They were not right. For people in that job, the mental health impacts on them are significant. In terms of the euthanising of cats and that issue, I've seen the impacts. I deal with the impacts. We've reduced our euthanasia rate hugely. It far less than when I started this job three years ago, but it is huge. I know you said before that there may be an opportunity for having groups of people do this. They already exist, and the impact on their mental health is massive.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you think a reason for that could be the lack of strategic understanding, awareness and support for that work?

STEPHEN ALBIN: Not at all.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: For example, how do we reconcile that certain cultural groups are—their practices are that they may kill particular animals for particular purposes. If there was a deep and comprehensive public interest, strategic awareness and understanding that a group of people like, for example, the National Parks and Wildlife Service people—who have been undertaking particular targeted programs of killing to protect ecosystems—is there room or scope for that? Obviously I accept that your line of work would not be compatible because you're in the rescuing and saving—I accept that. But what about the people who are into the rescuing and saving of the bandicoots, bettongs, possums and the mice that have been around for millions of years? Is there scope?

STEPHEN ALBIN: I can't answer that question. I really can't.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Ms Thompson, one of the things I would love to follow up with you—and thank you very much for your evidence; I appreciate your experience of many years. You said, "We've caught and we've killed and been doing that for years and it's not having an impact." Some of these programs have been very un-strategic and not supported in a whole-of-strategic plan. Do you accept that catching and killing without a proper comprehensive plan, without a vision to get to zero cats in the environment unless they're cared for, owned and controlled—do you accept that that's where the failure of any cat capture and kill program would fall down?

NELL THOMPSON: I would have thought that someone around the world would have been able to achieve that, if it was possible. We've seen so many advances in companion animal management and population management of a variety of species, and we've not quite got to that space. What we have seen is that small islands have managed to wipe out one species or another. We've got evidence, when it has been a cat wiped out, that other species have then increased their population and caused more damage on that island. We have this ecological balance situation that isn't as black and white as we would like it to be. Unfortunately, that's not something we have evidence for. I'd like to offer some—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Can I just ask one more thing? Sorry, I understand you have something else to add. Most of what I'm hearing so far in the evidence you've presented—and very fairly—assumes that cats have a place in the environment. Is that fair?

NELL THOMPSON: No, that's not true.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Can you help me understand where, in your vision, you see that cats will not be in the environment of New South Wales?

NELL THOMPSON: That's a question. I am not fully aware of the ecological intricacies of the New South Wales environment. You will have experts in your departments that will be able to say, "There are these at-risk species or threatened species in a certain location, and we need to manage whatever pest populations or species are in there." If we're talking about feral cats, G2Z does not deal in feral cats; we deal in domestic cats, which is stray, unowned, owned and semi-owned. To speak to that, once again, you need to look at the environment you have. I live in a location in Victoria; I live next to a national park. No, it is not appropriate for cats to go wandering in the national park. But the people who live near the national park, like I do, are not offered any support, information or anything at all to help them contain their cats, desex their cats or reduce the populations. If you're going to have one, you need to have the other as well.

I'd like to offer you some positive program information from the meetings. I met with Bendigo council shelter earlier this month. They have implemented a very strategic and very intensive free microchipping and cat desexing program. Since that's happened, their reclaim rate for cats has increased to 50 per cent and the intake of cats has reduced by 60 per cent, I think she said. So much so that, in the middle of kitten season, they ran out of cats a number of times and were able to take cats from neighbouring municipalities to offer them up for adoption. This is only over 12 to 24 months that they've been running this program. That's how quickly the results can occur when you're implementing the kinds of strategies that we're talking about today.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Just following up on one point about some ethical issues and some paradoxes—we're going to hear from some witnesses later on from Campbelltown, and one of the concerns that they raise is the annual permit fee for cats not desexed by four months. They conclude by saying:

> The annual permit fee was deployed to encourage desexing but in many ways it is resulting in the complete opposite.

I was wondering, in line with what you've just been saying, if you could comment on that?

STEPHEN ALBIN: They're a hundred per cent right. That is a major issue. Even if councils could extend that period—if someone comes to a shelter and gets an animal from us, it's licence-free so that you don't have to pay that licence. But in terms of the council pounds, they're right. If you get an animal after four months or one

that hasn't been desexed within that period, I think it is a massive disincentive for people to take that animal and desex it.

The CHAIR: I might throw another question in quickly, given there are a couple of minutes left. I wanted to ask you both about the cat management pilot program. I'm wanting to get a bit more understanding, Mr Albin, as to how that works, whether you would like to see some more investment in that, and if you think that is one of the primary things that we should be recommending in regards to this inquiry: to expand those pilot programs and make them much larger, or do they need to be more focused?

STEPHEN ALBIN: At the moment we're going through two pilots. One is in the far South Coast and the other one is in Glen Innes. We've put, as I said before, our own money into it. It's being run by our branches. One of the real issues that we came up against in doing any of this is trap, neuter, release. You can't release an animal, so we worked out ways whereby we could look at the management humanely. We could own the animals and continue to get them desexed and reduce the number of animals in the colony. It's early days, so we've only been doing this now for eight months.

It seems to be working pretty well. When we get more information, we'll be able to—we're getting the animals desexed at local vets. We're paying for all of that. We've given $40,000 to each of those two areas to look at specific colonies. We think, if it does work—and I'm sure the RSPCA has also had experience with this as well—then, definitely, it should be adopted on a broader scale, especially in areas where there are problems. There are specific areas that we know around New South Wales that are particularly affected by unowned and semi-owned cats, community cats.

The CHAIR: Do you have any early results from that program?

STEPHEN ALBIN: I'm happy to share those with you.

The CHAIR: Did you want to take that on notice?

STEPHEN ALBIN: I'll take that on notice, yes.

The CHAIR: That brings us to the end of our time. Thank you both for your evidence today. If there were any questions taken on notice, the secretariat will be in contact. The Committee members may have further questions as well. Sorry, Ms Susan Carter has one quick question.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Sorry—a question that I'm happy for you to take on notice. I think you both mentioned microtargeting earlier, as a strategy. I wonder if you've done any mapping about microtargeting and what the areas of priority would be for microtargeting.

STEPHEN ALBIN: We can take that on notice. We can contact our branches who are on the ground there.

The CHAIR: The Committee will now break for lunch.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

Ms TARA WARD, Volunteer Managing Solicitor, Animal Defenders Office, affirmed and examined

Ms LOUISE WARD, Programs Lead, Four Paws Australia, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our next witnesses and thank them both for their time to give evidence. Before I ask for a short opening statement from Four Paws, I want to declare a conflict of interest: Ms Louise Ward and I have previously worked together at the Animal Justice Party before she was working with Four Paws, who she represents today. Does Four Paws have a short opening statement it would like to make?

LOUISE WARD: Yes, we do. Four Paws is the global animal welfare organisation for animals under direct human influence and operates with a commitment to sustainable, humane and science-based approaches. With offices in 16 countries, including Australia, and 11 species-appropriate sanctuaries, we work to build a world where animals are treated with respect, empathy and understanding. Four Paws has over 25 years experience in effective cat management. We run successful programs across Europe and South-East Asia, guided by a One Health approach, recognising the interconnectedness of human, animal and environmental health. Four Paws employs the internationally recognised trap, neuter, vaccinate, return approach for managing stray cat populations. TNVR is widely acknowledged as the most humane and effective strategy for reducing stray cat numbers over time. By sterilising and vaccinating cats, we prevent further reproduction and the spread of diseases, allowing populations to stabilise and decline in a sustainable manner. Last year alone, we sterilised and vaccinated over 30,000 cats worldwide in a range of targeted programs.

As a recognised expert in this area, Four Paws is concerned regarding current cat management practices and approaches in New South Wales, particularly the focus on introducing mandatory cat containment laws. Whilst we acknowledge the need for effective cat management strategies and support policies and programs that encourage and assist people to contain their cats, we believe that mandating cat containment is ineffective and it risks unintended consequences. Evidence-based solutions, including free desexing in targeted areas, education on responsible pet ownership, community cat programs, and support and investment in long-term sustainable cat management, will also better meet the needs of cat owners and carers, rescue and welfare organisations, local councils and the broader community.

The misdirected vilification of cats that exists in Australia is simply not evident elsewhere in the world where we currently run community cat and sterilisation programs, with cats being blamed here in Australia for the majority of species extinctions. This ignores the primary threat of deforestation and land clearing on native animals for the purposes of agriculture or housing developments across regional and metropolitan environments. There are vastly better alternatives to the broadly accepted approaches to cat management currently used in Australia. Four Paws runs science-based community cat programs in urban and regional areas across the world, which could be replicated in Australia.

We currently run a program in Kalimantan, Borneo. Kalimantan has a diverse ecosystem and is home to a wide range of endangered species, including rare birds who face threats from stray animals. Four Paws identified the need to stabilise stray cat populations to mitigate these threats while also promoting animal welfare in a way that was supported by the community. In collaboration with local organisations, Four Paws established mobile clinics providing veterinary care, sterilisation and vaccinations for both stray and semi-owned animals. The program demonstrates the benefits of humane population control through sterilisation and vaccination.

By improving the health and reducing the number of stray animals, the impact on wildlife is effectively lowered without resorting to lethal control, which has been tried and failed time and time again. We also deliver programs in urban settings. For the last 10 years we have worked in partnership with the Government in Sofia, Bulgaria, delivering a community cat program which involves targeted free desexing in localities, stray cat desexing vouchers, community engagement and monitoring. The program achieves an 80 per cent sterilisation rate. These models are viable alternatives to lethal cat control in New South Wales, with proven success in environmentally sensitive areas.

We have a few recommendations for the inquiry, which are to increase investment in community cat programs that include targeted free desexing following a One Health approach to amend the current laws in New South Wales that currently make TNVR illegal; ban the sale of cats and kittens in pet shops, other than rescues; and increase regulation licensing requirements for online sales and free giveaways via platforms such as Gumtree and Trading Post.

The CHAIR: Does the ADO have an opening statement?

TARA WARD: Yes. I'm a volunteer running a volunteer-based national community legal centre based in the ACT, which is the only jurisdiction in Australia to have acknowledged animal sentience in its animal welfare legislation. As this inquiry is about management of cat populations and their impact on wildlife, I am mindful that

the acknowledgement of sentience applies to all animals—wild, native, introduced, farmed and domesticated—and includes cats in all the various categories we put them in. In this opening statement I will briefly try to focus on possible ways forward in this situation, where I think we all agree that there are too many cats out there, which has a whole range of issues for them, for wildlife, for the environment and for humans.

In terms of ways forward, the ADO would encourage the Committee to consider early age mandatory desexing with supporting education programs—I'm from a jurisdiction where cats are legally required to be desexed from three months of age; review what powers local councils have now to deal with cats, clarifying where there is ambiguity; consider what is not working as intended and where there are enforcement issues resulting in existing powers not being used; consider mandatory 24/7 containment on a local basis—for example, for new urban areas near bushland or wildlife areas so that people can make a choice as to whether they want to live there and keep animals in those conditions; encourage containment elsewhere with education and support; and consider whether increased rates of cat containment require new or different welfare monitoring and compliance actions. Contained cats, in a sense, will become invisible, much more so than dogs, so how will we know when neglect, lack of exercise, hoarding or abuse is occurring?

Stop the supply of cats. Unregulated purpose breeding of cats is still occurring. Indiscriminate buying and selling of cats can occur on Gumtree and other platforms, and perhaps to a lesser extent in pet shops. Support the on-the-ground carers. Consider supporting them with funding and clear standards and guidelines. Recognise them as providing a valuable social service. Facilitate rather than criminalise the trap, neuter and release or rehome and support programs and the volunteers who carry them out. Finally, step back and acknowledge all the other actions humans could take now to stop the threats to and destruction of wildlife. How can we stop harming them and their habitat? For example, why are we not investing in infrastructure such as wildlife corridors that would help protect them in that degraded habitat? The fear is that killing or containing cats is not going to help our precious wildlife if we keep engaging in these other inherently harmful and destructive activities.

The CHAIR: I'll start with a couple of questions. Ms Tara Ward—noticing that I can't call either of you Ms Ward—you mentioned mandatory desexing. From your experience, does mandating desexing work at all?

TARA WARD: That's the burning question. I would rely on data. We've heard a lot in the two days of hearings for this inquiry about how everything that we do needs to be data driven. I would ask, where is that data? I would hope that the ACT Government has been gathering that data and undertaking that research to show whether or not it works. From our experience, it's the inevitable situation: It works for the responsible companion animal carers, but there are always the people for whom it is more difficult. They're unaware or they just lack the financial means to engage in it. It is an expensive procedure and there aren't the measures to assist dogs and cats, if we're focusing on the typical companion animals, and their carers to undertake that. At the ADO we see more hesitation and reluctance regarding the desexing of dogs. There are still some urban myths out there that do their best to stop people from desexing their dogs, but I'm certainly not aware of any evidence that it isn't working or that it has negative consequences.

The CHAIR: I have another question that's probably best for both of you. It's something that we've been hearing quite a bit throughout this inquiry: the push to introduce definitions of different types of cats and putting cats into different categories, such as "owned", "semi-owned" and "unowned", with the implication being that each of these cats may receive different types of treatment and different management approaches. I wanted to get from both of you what your response is to this and if you think it's a good idea to be classifying cats in this way, or if there are any risks associated with classifying cats in different categories.

LOUISE WARD: I'm happy to go first. In our submission we included definitions of cats. We would say that different categories of cats require different management strategies. Cats that might be semi-owned that are being looked after in a colony situation have different needs or different resource inputs than cats that might be unowned or owned. We do find the categorisation of feral cats problematic. A lot of the time cats that are unowned or semi-owned are categorised as feral, when in fact they're relying on people to feed them, so they don't fit the definition of what a feral cat is. Once cats are defined as feral, it gives a licence for a whole range of what we would describe as cruel practices, whether it's poisoning or trapping and killing. So, yes, it can be problematic for cats to be categorised as feral.

TARA WARD: The Animal Defenders Office would certainly agree with that. For example, in our view, it wasn't helpful that the recent threat abatement plan lumped a whole wide variety of cats under this one label of "feral". We don't think that's helpful in terms of thinking of solutions. In a sense it presupposes the outcome if you're already labelling our animals as "feral". That's why we prefer the term "wild", because it doesn't have those negative connotations. The problem would be whether once you get beyond the wild cats, whether it is helpful to pin down the various categories in legislation. It could be that that's attempted in policy at some kind of at least State level. One example is, of course, the often-used term "puppy farming" that, as far as I'm aware, no legislation

has grappled with a definition for. There's a reason for that: because it can mean different things in different contexts. Clearly, legislatures have decided that it hasn't been helpful to define that in most instances.

The CHAIR: This is another question following on from that in regard to some of the terminology that's used. I remember when there were some campaigns using certain terminology and language surrounding cats. Even the RSPCA in New South Wales came out with a statement of concern around demonising cats and how that could potentially lead to acts of animal cruelty. They were very concerned about that. Is that something that you have concerns about as well—that if a particularly species is demonised, that might also encourage acts of cruelty in the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act?

LOUISE WARD: That's definitely an issue. Four Paws is an international organisation and works across a number of countries, and obviously I work with international colleagues who are quite shocked at the media that they see coming out of Australia around the vilification of cats. That does potentially lead to increased acts of cruelty. Of course, we've seen council areas with bounties on cats. There's widespread use of 1080 and trapping of cats. It's definitely something that we view as an issue. I'm not sure if it's unique to Australia, but certainly that has been commented on by some international colleagues in comparison to the community cat programs that they work on across Europe and in South-East Asia.

TARA WARD: Certainly, the ADO is contacted by members of the public who engage in this kind of on-the-ground support and care for cats whom they don't keep on a day-to-day basis. There's a lot of anxiety in that community about that sort of direct or indirect encouragement of what amounts to cruel behaviour towards cats because of this process of demonising. Demonising is not new to humans; we've been doing it throughout human history to either other humans or non-human animals. But in terms of the consequences for the subject, we're certainly receiving more and more contact from members of the community who are very concerned about this and see it as a direct consequence of this process of targeting cats as the cause of evil in the wildlife space.

The CHAIR: The other thing that has come up quite a bit in this inquiry is that there are some very strong opinions in support of trap and neuter programs. Ms Louise Ward, in your opening statement, you mentioned that Four Paws has done quite a lot of work in this space. First of all, why is there so much division about it? Can you respond to some of the comments that have been made that these sorts of programs are completely ineffective and we shouldn't really be support the desexing programs?

LOUISE WARD: I can speak from our experience. I think one of the reasons that there might be division over the success is that there is, in general, a lack of effective evaluation and monitoring in some programs. That's due to resource constraints, obviously, or inexperience. As part of Four Paws, we have a science unit within our global office, so we conduct surveys prior to running any programs. All our programs involve surveying and monitoring, community education and community engagement. We can assess that we've got an 80 per cent sterilisation rate. We've demonstrated that across Bulgaria. The Government has continually engaged us to work in newer areas because of the success of the programs.

I gave the example of Kalimantan in Borneo. For many years they have been doing killing programs in that area, killing the cats and the dogs. It was not effective over time, and the other issue is that the community didn't accept the widespread and continual killing of healthy animals as an acceptable approach for them. I think that more evaluation needs to be done and it needs to be built in at the start—proper population surveys; mark, capture and release; and then continuing tracking sterilisation rates and looking at the reduction in animals over time. We could provide information to the inquiry. We have 25 years experience running these programs globally and would be happy to provide that.

The CHAIR: That would be fantastic, thank you. Ms Tara Ward, did you have anything to add?

TARA WARD: No, thanks.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: The Invasive Species Council suggested that roaming pet cats are killing up to 100-plus native animals a year. Do you acknowledge that and believe that?

LOUISE WARD: For Four Paws, I can't speak from our experience. We've not done science-based work in Australia. But I think there have been challenges to those numbers, and I believe the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation challenges those numbers. There have been several other studies that have challenged that. I know just recently Brisbane City Council was performing some autopsies on stray cats, expecting to find the remains of native animals within those cats, but they only found black rats. In our submission, we've talked about the number of non-native animals that stray cats are also consuming, so we would challenge that and refer to numerous other studies. WIRES also gave some evidence to challenge that, as well as the RSPCA.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: We've heard other evidence that things like registration, microchipping and desexing are a bit cost prohibitive to people. Are you hearing similar reports?

TARA WARD: Being a community legal centre, we inevitably deal with or interact with people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Certainly, it is a phenomenon that these people struggle to meet those legal requirements. But, having said that, they are legal requirements, and hopefully they're there for good public policy reasons. It's just overcoming that hurdle of trying to convey that these measures are necessary and there's a broader public policy purpose to them. We find that even when there's resistance to, say, desexing—and that's the measure that costs the most—if you take the time to talk people through the public policy reasons, we find that they're receptive to those and they take those on board. Otherwise, that initial barrier of the financial cost is an issue. If we were serious about helping people get over those, we would put in place programs that can help people who are genuinely financially disadvantaged.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Are you suggesting that taxpayers should subsidise people who can't afford those measures?

TARA WARD: That would be the debate that we as a society and a community would need to have. Do we want to do that? How far do we take that right, if we want to call it a right—I don't think it is a right—or entitlement to have companion animals? That's where the debate would be and where hopefully we would reach some kind of shared outcome on that issue.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: The Animal Defenders Office submission talks about the lesser domestication of cats compared with dogs and how restricting their natural behaviours can cause mental distress. Does that include hunting?

TARA WARD: That's what you immediately think of, isn't it? Certainly from my experience, I have a number of rescued cats from various different jurisdictions. I say that only to say that they've come from completely different backgrounds, so hopefully they are exhibiting a completely random cross-section of behaviours. There would be a lot of behaviours that they would exhibit that wouldn't come under the category or the heading of hunting. There are a lot of other natural behaviours. In fact, I'm at home a lot and my partner is at home a lot. We see our cats and we don't see them hunt. We see them chase. They try, but they're pretty hopeless. They'll go after the butterflies or they'll go after the cats up on the washing line. Given that it is a behaviour of theirs, we would need to consider measures to curtail that because we don't want that. For us, it's stopping them bringing in the occasional mouse. Ours will bring in mice and the very occasional—I think the term is skink or lizard. That's all we see, and we've got eight. They've been strays and rescued street cats, and we're home, pretty much, a lot of the time.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: If yours aren't among the ones that are killing the native animals, if we're not going to contain them, how do we stop them from killing native animals—or is that just a sacrifice we have to make so cats can live out their natural behaviours?

TARA WARD: I think a starting point would be that assumption that all cats are out there killing native animals, because our lived experience is that that is not the case. That's all I'm saying: Our lived experience is that that is not the case. One would want fairly good, robust data in order to be taking any sort of fairly drastic measures in terms of welfare impact on the target animal, in this case the cats. I think you could find that balance and allow for or encourage daytime outdoor time for the cats and bringing the cats inside at night-time, for example. Other witnesses have provided ways of doing that. We're lawyers; we're not animal behaviourists or vets, so I'm not going to go down that path. It would be how can we minimise. We all use cars and we know that we can strike wildlife, but that doesn't mean that we just stop using them altogether. It's finding that appropriate balance, I think.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Ms Ward, do you think it's a trade-off that we need to make?

LOUISE WARD: In our submission we do make the point that cat containment should be encouraged and supported by policies and education. I know some councils have also given subsidies for different catios and things. Yes, our position is that it should be supported, but mandating it would be ineffective and have a whole range of unintended consequences. I think it was the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation, in their submission, provided information that actually 65 per cent of cats are contained at the moment during the day, and I think it was 93 per cent at night. So I think there are a lot of people that are containing their cats. People are in circumstances sometimes where it's difficult to contain their cats, and that needs to be taken into consideration. These types of laws would, I think, disproportionately affect vulnerable people and vulnerable communities.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So for those people that aren't in a position to contain their cats, acknowledging that they are going to do some hunting, is that just a sacrifice we make so that person can have a cat—we acknowledge that they are going to kill a few budgies or whatever that might be?

LOUISE WARD: There are things that we could do to support people further to contain their cats. Some people don't have flyscreens, for example. Some people are living in, maybe, a domestic violence situation where it's difficult to contain a cat. Then there are also other issues like bells and things like that, if you're saying that

cats are going outside. But I would take Tara's point, as well, that the numbers are contested about the number of native animals that uncontained, owned cats are killing.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: If it's a contested space that cats are killing native wildlife, what is the point of a cat containment strategy at all?

LOUISE WARD: I don't think that it's contested that cats do kill native wildlife. I mean, that is a fact. What we're saying is that it's perhaps disproportionate to other threats that are facing native animals. I think we've mentioned deforestation land. New South Wales is the only developed country that's a hotspot for deforestation, so we're still clearing massive amounts of land. Animals are trying to survive in fragmented landscapes. A recent report by Greenpeace and the RSPCA Queensland was talking about the impacts of deforestation on native animals and that vet clinics are saying that the majority of animals coming to them are from the impacts of deforestation, not from attacks on cats.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: So is it your submission that we do nothing about cats until we've addressed every other threat to native wildlife?

LOUISE WARD: No. As we said in our submission, we support and encourage policies that reduce the number of cats by mass-targeting desexing programs, desexing vouchers and education.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Sorry, how does desexing a cat reduce a cat as a predator?

LOUISE WARD: It reduces their ability to reproduce. That's the issue that we're having—that there are too many cats that are unowned, living on the street, struggling to survive.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: What's the average hunting life of a cat following desexing?

LOUISE WARD: I'm not sure.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Because I guess that's what I'm struggling with: Desexing doesn't stop a cat hunting wildlife.

LOUISE WARD: There have been a number of studies by the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation that have shown that going in with what has been tried—which is a bit of an ad hoc strategy where you're going in and you're trapping or you're killing a few of the cats—over time, that hasn't actually reduced the number of cats. There's a great example from the University of New South Wales, where they had a significant number of cats living there. They were going to go in and kill the cats, but the staff and students fought against that. They've run a really successful desexing program. I think they've gone—and don't quote me on this, but I can provide the figures—from having 50 or 60 cats within that colony to less than 10 now.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Are you aware of how many native wildlife species would live in Kensington or Randwick?

LOUISE WARD: No.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Just on another issue, Ms Ward, you gave us your lived experience as a responsible cat owner, and we've heard evidence of community cat ownership and a range of different ways that people care for cats or are involved in a cat's life, but wouldn't have them living in the house with them and therefore be able to contain them in that way. Have you got any sense of the percentage of responsible cat owners to social cat owners or other ways people have of interacting with cats?

TARA WARD: I can say that we don't. We're a community legal centre, so we don't.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: It's just that the examples that you gave us of your lived experience are very useful, but I'm wondering what percentage of cat owners does that relate to.

TARA WARD: Yes, I can't extrapolate from that, sorry.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Would you have any concept, Ms Ward?

LOUISE WARD: I think Australian Pet Welfare Foundation quotes that 65 per cent of cats are contained during the day time and 93 per cent of cats are contained at night, which would suggest that most people are.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: You raised the issue of belling the cat. Is it a simple, low-cost, effective solution that all cats wear bells? Would that be protective of wildlife?

LOUISE WARD: I'm not an expert in that area, so I could potentially take that on notice.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: If you could, that would be great.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: This morning we heard some evidence from the Australian Wildlife Conservancy. If I could just quote from page 5, "Cats are the primary cause of mammal extinctions in Australia and a leading threat to remaining mammals", and they quote a number of research papers. Later on they write:

> Feral cats—

and they use that term—

> are a major and ongoing threat to conservation of Australian wildlife, with estimated kill rates noted to be "substantially higher than … land clearing".

They quote some research on that. One of the things that they've recommended in the remaining areas that need to be particularly protected is the use of conservation fences. They've cited how they've actually established those in many areas throughout Australia and are hoping for more. It's the equivalent, basically, in medieval times of building a castle or building a wall to protect themselves. I'm wondering if you have any comments on that approach—that basically, whatever else we do, for particular areas of high conservation, we need to actually put a wall around it.

LOUISE WARD: That's not my area of expertise, so I probably couldn't comment on that approach. I didn't watch the hearing this morning, so I didn't see that evidence.

TARA WARD: I agree—yes, I'm not a conservationist nor have any expertise in that area. Having said that, I am from the ACT, and we have some areas that I think might be similar to the type of area you're discussing. One, I think, is Mulligans Flat. I'm just aware as a member of the public that that is a fairly successful endeavour, but it does require a lot of management and ongoing monitoring and managing. It is the subject of ongoing research, which is a good thing, to find out what works, what doesn't work, what's sustainable et cetera. It could be, again, but that is directed at or implies a case-by-case response or approach to the individual area, and what would be the best outcomes or solutions to protect wildlife in those areas, rather than just—and I know it's been spoken of for the two days of the hearing—a one size fits all, which I don't think anyone is actually advocating.

The CHAIR: I think it was the ADO's submission that recommended we adopt a moratorium on breeding cats and banning the sale of cats in pet shops, particularly at this moment. It doesn't make sense that we're breeding more cats when we've obviously—one thing that has come up in this inquiry is people recognise that there are too many cats, and then there's an argument about what the solutions are. Why do you make this suggestion that we should ban the intentional breeding of cats and the sale of cats in pet shops from breeders?

TARA WARD: I think it's just common sense. If we're looking at populations of any animal, but in this case, cats, on the one hand, we are—I think we'd use this expression—decrying the numbers of cats and their impact on the environment. Then, on the other hand, we're turning a blind eye to the breeding of these animals. It's unregulated. The recent changes that went through regarding the breeding of dogs was only about dogs and not about cats. So it really is an unregulated space, and that is the problem. Indiscriminate breeding of cats in any conditions is legal and can occur, including the selling and buying of these animals. Again, the anecdotal evidence provided to the ADO by members of the public who work in this space is another serious source of concern and anxiety is the fact that animals can be sold and bought on Gumtree and similar platforms. Many of them will pinpoint that as the key. That's what needs to change and be regulated, if not banned, before anything such as the indiscriminate supply of these animals that is adding to the very problem that everyone here is grappling with. I just don't see how we can be concerned about one aspect of the problem and just completely ignore what is, in a sense, feeding it, if that's the right term.

The CHAIR: Ms Louise Ward, did you have anything to add to that?

LOUISE WARD: We have also had that recommendation around banning the sale of cats and kittens in pet shops, and also increasing the regulation on online trade where you can purchase kittens but you can also get kittens for free very easily and the obvious impacts of that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Ms Louise Ward, you may have touched on this. I'm completely sympathetic with the argument about how dreadful this State is in relation to deforestation and the fact that we're still trashing our forests and so on. I'm just curious, though, about your submission where you say, "habitat loss" et cetera, "Despite this, flawed data is used to disproportionately scapegoat and blame cats for species extinctions." Is it something that you could help the Committee understand what flawed data you're referring to or if it's something you'd need to take on notice to provide that? I'm curious about what specifically you're referring to.

LOUISE WARD: Yes, we could take that on notice and provide. But, also, the historic issue and one we did mention in our inquiry around—I think it was Greg Hunt, when he was the environment Minister, who made the claim that there were 20 million feral cats killing 20 billion animals a year, which then was subsequently fact-checked by the ABC and found to be false.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I think Greg had a bit of a tendency.

LOUISE WARD: I guess a lot of the narrative that we see around the issue of cats is that you see a lot of different numbers. You can see there are five million cats. I think we've quoted one in here from the environment that estimates 0.7 million to 1.7 million cats. So I do think that it's something that more research needs to be done on, and I am aware of peer-reviewed papers that are being worked on now that maybe challenge some of the numbers.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you contest one of the more recent—Animal Medicines Australia says that there are about 5.3 million pet cats across Australia. Do you think that's fairly reliable?

LOUISE WARD: Yes, I guess that would be much easier to estimate.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: And then the other one, I think it's 1.6 million pet cats in New South Wales. Do you think that's fairly reliable, from your research and understanding?

LOUISE WARD: Yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: If you are happy to take on notice, I'm very curious about the flawed data. We touched on it earlier with some of the witnesses about how there seem to be fairly consistent claims that cats have contributed to at least half of the species extinctions in New South Wales. If you have anything that would suggest that that's flawed data, I think that would really benefit the Committee, if there's anything that you're aware of and that you can assist with.

LOUISE WARD: Yes. There are other things to take into consideration as well. I was reading a report that I think Jacquie Rand provided as part of her questions on notice around a study that was done in Western Australia looking at impacts of native animals of three different containment methods. One was cats were 24/7-contained, one was they were contained at night and the other area there was no containment at all. They didn't find a lot of difference between the impact on native animals, except for the area where cats had no containment. There was a greater number of small rodents, and they found that that was due to the fact that the vegetation was much better in the area where the cats were uncontained. So the issue around native animals' ability to survive and thrive in ecosystems where there hasn't been land clearing and when there hasn't been those deforestation impacts—yes, I think there's a whole range of factors.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I think it is much easier to understand the research and the data in some of those different ecosystems. But in terms of more urban environments, how do you reconcile or where do you think we are in relation to containment and mandatory containment, or getting to a point of mandatory containment—however we support the introduction of that—in relation to wildlife in urban environments where we're drastically deficit wherever we look, in terms of a natural ecosystem with abundant wildlife? How do you reconcile the data around what we know in terms of that wildlife deficit in the urban environments, and the presence of cats or the assumption that cats are fine in the environment?

LOUISE WARD: We reference a study in our submission around the impact of cats and eating non-native species—so black rats that also have a significant impact on birdlife. I can take that on notice, but there's certainly a lot of evidence to suggest that cats in urban environments are being fed by humans, are eating rubbish and are eating non-native animals as well. There are some areas around Canterbury-Bankstown where cats are living in very urban environments. I don't know about the abundance of wildlife in some of the areas where we do have large numbers of cats.

The CHAIR: That brings us to the end of this session. Thank you both so much for your time. There were definitely some questions taken on notice, and the secretariat will be in contact with you about those. There may be further questions as well from the Committee after today, which the secretariat will be in contact with you about as well. Thank you again for your time.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

Mr TIMOTHY CROSSMAN, President and General Manager, SAFE Rehoming, affirmed and examined

Mrs LISA RIORDAN, Team Leader, Community Helping Campbelltown Cats, affirmed and examined

Mr LUDOVIC BARBIER, Lead Cat Caretaker, Community Helping Campbelltown Cats, affirmed and examined

Ms STEPHANIE BATES, Owner and Manager, Westie Cat Support Services, sworn and examined

Ms LEAH MICHAEL, President, World League for Protection of Animals, affirmed and examined

Ms ANNA HALL, Manager, World League for Protection of Animals, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our next witnesses. Before I move to opening statements, I need to declare another conflict of interest, that Ms Anna Hall was the president at an organisation that I previously worked for, but she's not representing that organisation today. I'll start with Mr Timothy Crossman. Do you have a short opening statement you would like to make?

TIMOTHY CROSSMAN: Yes. Just to give some clarity, SAFE Rehoming—we're a small organisation based in northern Sydney and we primarily take in and rehabilitate and rehome cats. Through that work we have a good understanding of how the cat crisis in New South Wales is forming. We're fully supportive of some form of multi-pronged management program, including desexing and also things along the line of education and also community management of cats that are in the space that is not necessarily a home environment; and some form of partial cat containment programs, in that I think there are problems in trying to lump cat containment in a 24/7 basis because you end up with these community cats that are on the street and then that ends up causing problems down the line for the pound system and then also the smaller rescues such as ourselves.

I've seen a lot of the submissions and a lot of the evidence from the witnesses supporting a lot of this multi-pronged system. From our point of view, that seems like the best scenario. As a no-kill shelter as well, we often hear from members of the public, which I think goes to the overall sentiment of the community, that the no-kill model is something that should be looked at pretty seriously in that we're not looking to euthanise healthy, rehomable animals. That's really where we sit. We hope that there can be some form of legislative change to reflect all of that.

The CHAIR: Is there a short opening statement from Community Helping Campbelltown Cats?

LISA RIORDAN: I'd like to just provide a brief overview of what we do as well, because we didn't include that in our submission. Thank you to the Chair and the Committee for the opportunity to be here at today's proceeding. Community Helping Campbelltown Cats is a small community group made up of a few people that love cats and want to try and make a difference. We were established in 2016. We run purely via Facebook and we have nearly 27,000 followers at this point in time. Our key focus area over the years has really been assisting the Campbelltown Animal Care Facility with their rehoming of the animals that come into there, and we've done that via advertising.

We started taking on little projects of desexing and diversifying, if you like, and in 2022 we created a project called TNR Project Compassion. We started out with a goal of desexing 30 cats. As at this morning, we're at 710. So we kept going. There's clearly a need in our community in terms of doing this work. We don't consider ourselves to be a rescue organisation and we're not a rehoming body as such, but we do look to find solutions for the kittens, the sociable or able-to-be-socialised juveniles and adult cats that we come across in all the colony work that we do.

When we leave a colony, after we've finished desexing as well, we leave them with a caretaker—somebody that will look out for them and monitor their health and welfare and make sure they're fed. Many of our team members actually manage their own colonies too. We've got 10-plus years experience, each of us, basically in relation to how that's worked for us and the work that we've done. We rely purely on money from our own pockets, as well as donations from the community, to do the work that we do. We're not eligible for any government support or grants or anything like that because we're not an official organisation as such, but that is something that we're looking at down the track.

We know we do have a cat problem in south-western Sydney. That's not a surprise to anybody. But in all fairness, there has been little done by all our neighbouring councils around us in terms of proactive measures to improve the problem with cats in the community because they like to play the "Cats are free to roam" card, so they won't invest in that. I'm very pleased to say Campbelltown council, though, has been quite proactive in taking cats in off the street and looking for better solutions within the opportunities available, but there is still so much

more that needs to be done. We know and we've been hearing about the complex challenge that cat management is and I don't think anybody would disagree with that.

One of the things we've come across in our area, particularly areas like Campbelltown, is that we get contacted by a lot of social workers reaching out for help for people in the community that have a cat problem. Generally these people are people that are struggling financially and in difficult circumstances. One of the little projects I took on before Compassion started—it really was quite daunting and eye-opening for me—was a lovely lady who did have mental illness, that was living in a house with 23 cats. She had them all indoors, which was amazing, fantastic. They weren't hurting the wildlife or anything like that. But she was living in wall-to-wall excrement up to seven centimetres deep in her house. It's just an experience you don't forget. We assisted in terms of being able to get many of the cats to rescue. All of them got desexed, obviously.

She was left with a few cats to look after going forward, but she couldn't afford the desexing herself. So they kept procreating and she couldn't afford the litter. That's obviously a consideration when we look at the bigger picture. Another case that we came across—again, introduced by a social worker—was a lovely lady who felt like she literally had nothing else to live for but her cats. But they were breeding, so we went in to desex. But she made it really clear to me on day one that she felt, if anybody took any of her cats away, that she would commit suicide, and I believed her. Needless to say, we desexed the cats and we left. From our perspective, trying to keep within the two to three minutes here, accepting that cats are here and they're part of our ecosystem is a reality that we need to do.

Stopping the demonisation is absolutely critical in terms of making sure we just focus on what we can do to make things better. How can we better manage the populations in a humane manner? We would never target a particular type of person or a person from a particular background and say that we're going to eliminate you. We wouldn't treat humans that way. The outcomes of these sessions—and I'm really pleased to hear all the positive conversation that's happening—is to make sure that we remember the subject is as much about the people as it is the cats: the community, the rescuers, the feeders, the shelter workers, the veterinary staff and all the people who are so impacted by everything that potentially could happen out of the decisions made from this inquiry.

STEPHANIE BATES: Westie Cat Support Services focuses primarily on TNR—trap, neuter, release—with also some rescue. We're concentrated in the suburbs that comprise Cumberland City Council, Canterbury-Bankstown council, City of Parramatta Council and Fairfield City Council. We, therefore, deal primarily with semi-owned and unowned cats, whom I will refer to as community cats. On the odd occasion, we deal with owned cats. The current situation for cats in these areas is quite dire, which has been significantly heightened by the inclusion of these cats alongside wild cats in non-urban areas, also known as feral cats in the Federal threat abatement plan introduced in 2024. I would like to let you know my position on a few different things. For wild cats in non-urban areas, I support population control for these cats, particularly in ecologically delicate and significant areas. I do not support the mass culling of community cats in urban areas.

I think that we need to address issues to do with what's impacting on cats in urban areas as well as non-urban areas: the characteristics of the cats, the location of the cats, whether they're desexed or not, and if they have access to being managed or not. I call myself a TNR practitioner. In so doing, I recognise the value of TNR; I also recognise its limitations. In terms of the community management tool, it can actually be quite worthwhile, but the work involved with this is extensive. Westie Cat goes into a situation in the field and starts assessing. A plan is put in place for how to deal with the cats. Any cats that need rescue are sometimes rescued, but sometimes they're not. We're now in the situation where we are actually desexing friendly cats that are on the street that, for example, the various council rangers cannot take into the pound system.

They're not taken in for any holding period; they stay on the street. So, in order to stop them reproducing, we start desexing them. We have to work very closely with community members. This involves meetings and plan formulation. I re-evaluate the plan. I assess the plan as I go along and I look at the outcomes that we achieve. Then I measure them against similar case studies and plans that were put in place for other areas. A TNR practitioner has to deal with sick cats, injured cats, unsocialised cats and tame cats, and a variety of different people in the community. I support cat containment to an extent. I don't think it should be mandatory. I support cat containment on a property, not solely indoors. But I think there are a lot of issues to do with it. It should never be mandatory except for perhaps in various locations next to wildlife areas.

I think there are a lot of problems to do with mandatory cat containment if an escaped cat leaves their property. It also has massive impacts for roaming cats—community cats that have been TNRed. There are issues to do with cruelty towards them. There are issues to do with them not even entering the pound system. There are issues to do with them. There are issues to do with them ending up in undesirable situations. We get confronted with people dumping cats and abandoning cats. We deal with lost cats. Some that have a microchip have been reunited with owners because the trapped cats are always checked for a microchip. We do all these activities in

our own home. I use some parts of my home for a cat shelter. My dining room is a cat shelter—and one of the spare rooms in the house and the garage—because TNR cats is a process in which they are managed, trapped and taken to the vet the next morning.

A liaison occurs with the vet if, for example, the cat is sick or injured. Sometimes we will have a cat euthanised because it's not possible to put the cat back in their colony or their situation, or their injuries or illnesses are beyond our financial means to take care of. For the cats picked up from the vet clinic, the cat is then held for one to five days. Once the cat passes various benchmarks to do with how it's recovering, the cat will then get released. I think the Companions Animal Act is a blunt instrument, at this point, that's trying to deal with the complexities of roaming and owned cats in New South Wales.

I think there need to be some amendments to do with community members taking it upon themselves to trap cats—whether owned or unowned—and the investigation of this practice, the penalties for this practice and who is responsible for monitoring this practice. Is it the RSPCA cruelty inspectors? Is it a council animal ranger? Who is it? Is it an AWL inspector? The role and powers of the council need to be clearly defined and ascertained. My approach generally to this inquiry is coming from an animal welfare perspective, not necessarily threatened species protection in urban areas—or indeed other species protection in other areas. I also think that there's a paucity of research on domestic and urban cats—owned, unowned and community—in urban areas. Even in the threat abatement plan, it's stated that they're talking about non-urban cats, yet they're trying to extrapolate the data for urban cats and talk about urban cats in the same sentence, pretty much.

It's quite ridiculous. We do need more solid, substantive and well-done research on urban cats. At the moment, it's not really there. There's a lot of crazy statistics put out there. The ANU, in 2023, stated that roaming pet cats kill 66 million native animals each year in Sydney. I would question that. There's also not very much talk about what species are actually killing and exactly how many. A lot of their information is based on anecdotal reports from wildlife organisations. However, the anecdotal evidence given by people who actually rescue and TNR cats, for some bizarre reason, is never taken into account. That's probably because they don't even talk to us, so it's great to have this investigation and this Committee.

The CHAIR: I'll move on to the World League for Protection of Animals, if you have a short opening statement?

ANNA HALL: Yes, we'll both speak. Thank you very much for the invitation. WLPA, which stands for World League for Protection of Animals, as the name implies, is a charity committed to protecting all animals. We're here to advocate for all species, with an awareness of the complexity of these problems and the need to act in evidence-based, compassionate manners. WLPA only adopts cats to people who agree to contain their cats within their property. Extensive education regarding the benefits and practices of this are given to them at the time of adoption. WLPA strongly encourages containment and supports moves to assist people making an informed decision and resourcing them to shift in this direction. Behaviours can be changed; we see it every day when we walk past an increasing number of greyhounds that have been adopted as pets—you did not see that many pet greyhounds 20 or 30 years ago—and all the other rescued animals that have been adopted.

WLPA opposes mandatory cat containment and suggests instead if there is to be some legal enforcement in this area, it should be of legislation that has been around for nearly half a century, notably POCTAA, part 2, section 11, with prosecutions for those involved in the current devastating avalanche of animal abandonment, of which all who work in animal rescue are a victim of every day when they have to deal with these cases. There could also be investigation of challenging businesses like Gumtree, which facilitate and profit from unlawful trade in ummicrochipped companion animals, namely cats and dogs. That is covered in the Companion Animals Act, part 2.

Without repeating the evidence already tabled today, I'd like to say that free-living cats are demonised but sentient beings, responsible for only a small portion of native wildlife deaths, with the chief causes of this being the tragic state of affairs involving land clearing, introduced diseases, major fires et cetera. There is ample evidence for the ineffectiveness of mass killing of animals, which has been carried out for one or two centuries now. They are now part of contemporary local ecosystems. This includes them being a food source, which is often forgotten. Cats are also preyed on, as well as predators.

The most humane and practical alternatives appear to WLPA to be trials of autoimmune contraception. If that was combined with an end to habitat destruction and repair, we think major gains could be made. The animals' lives matter to them and to others. Please use this opportunity and the resources put into the inquiry to champion alternate remedies from those that have been tried in the past, with the power to assist all animals in doing this. And you never know, future inquiries and investigations may then use the results of this inquiry to formulate their policies.

LEAH MICHAEL: I've only been with WLPA, on the board, for three years. Prior to that, I've had extensive dealings with cats in the community, mostly in the inner west and Callan Park—those areas where we established TNR, and it certainly worked. They were in areas—especially at Callan Park—where there's other wildlife. There's lots of possums but that was not an issue there. They were always being dumped there because it was a hospital and people know that hospital staff are caring and will look after the cats. That type of thing happens. There we managed to desex all the cats on the premises and we took all the kittens away and rehomed them. Eventually, what happens is the actual colony dies out. I did that sort of work in a few areas within the inner west for a number of years, and that's exactly what happened in smaller colonies than Callan Park. That's how TNR works. Then what happened in 2010, I was actually advised of the situation in the Canterbury Bankstown area, so I'll just go from there.

My perspective is based on personal and organisational experience. I was reminded early on that one type of management of cat populations does not fit all urban areas. If you do not address the source of the problem, in particular local government areas, nothing's going to change. When I met with the animal control person at Canterbury Bankstown—it was just Canterbury Council at the time; there was no merger—in 2012, his first words were, "It is not a cat problem; it is a people problem." That was very reassuring to hear because everyone talks about the cats—they demonise them.

In 2010, in locating the immense number of suffering abandoned street cats in that particular LGA, I had sought the assistance of DABS—Domestic Animal Birth Control Society—and World League for Protection of Animals to undertake intensive desexing and rehoming in that area. This intervention has been an ongoing process in the area, although, over time, funded primarily by individuals and different groups. What we had not factored in was the constant dumping and abandonment of cats and kittens throughout the area, which continues to this day. It's different in different locations; some people really grasp desexing and containment and all that.

Successive councils and elected officials, whilst putting some initiatives in place regarding cheaper desexing of cats, have failed to address the real issue—the people. These particular issues are not exclusive to that Sydney LGA, though, I might add. Solutions are complex but achievable if people are willing to work together on those issues. Interventions need to be based on a number of factors, and we're required to be specific and targeted to those particular LGAs where the problem exists. I think the focus needs to be on preventing cats ending up on the streets in the first place. That's the issue.

Another undiscussed issue is mental health. Government officials knowingly ignoring the realities of cat abandonment in their areas have placed a huge burden on community members and rescues, who are all unfunded. They're self-funded, as WLPA is as well. That burden can be financial, cause family and personal disruptions and mental health concerns. In some situations, these burdens placed on community members have been very long term. Some persons are ill equipped to deal with a level of distress associated with cats and kittens abandoned, often on a daily basis, and solutions in some situations may not be well thought out. I think that's how people get into difficulties—take on too much—and we've heard that already about how people can't manage. I think simple and cruel solutions re cat management will have a huge impact on the mental health of community members. I don't think it's a very good idea to just go in and take cats away, basically. I think it's more complex.

The majority of cats that I would see on the street are tame cats. Some may not appear to be tame at first, but you actually can tame them. It means that they've probably been dumped and then they're really scared and they don't trust people. Or they could be, maybe, born there on the street. They're second-generation cats. If they're around people, they can be tamed, so I think all possibilities are there. It's about doing intensive education of people in certain communities, and also cheap desexing. If we're going to put money anywhere, it should be towards the people who are doing the rescues. They shouldn't have to pay to have cats desexed. The other thing I'd like to mention, too, is that not all pet shops are problematic. A lot of pet shops do rehome rescue cats. From that particular area, with one pet store, I've placed well over 1,000 cats to be rehomed in that store, desexed cats, and people come in there wanting rescue cats. I think we've got to be a little bit not knocking everything on the head and saying, "That doesn't work." I think it's very complex and we've got to be open to looking at solutions, really.

The CHAIR: I understand there are a lot of groups here, and thank you for going through each of those opening statements. I will start with a couple of quick questions because I know that there are other Committee members who have a lot of questions as well. Mr Crossman, you mention in your submission concerns about some of the administrative challenges faced by rehoming organisations in accessing and updating the Companion Animals Register. For the benefit of the Committee, can you outline what some of these challenges are and what you'd like to see change, and how that could also help in this space for cats?

TIMOTHY CROSSMAN: Of course, yes. At the moment, as it is, we are dealing with a variety of different cats coming into our care. Some of them are not microchipped at all and they're actually the easy ones,

believe it or not. As a qualified chipper myself, I can chip those and with that access I can put them onto the register when they're adopted. The challenge that we face mostly is when we're getting cats that have already been chipped. Often, they're private surrenders. What we have to do then is we submit the paperwork off to the council, the council changes the name, and then we have to go and submit that again once the cat is adopted.

There's this double handling going on that is—and I'm sure everyone will attest to this—paperwork up to your head, basically. Part of the resolution in that, especially with the introduction of the registered rehoming organisations is to allow some sort of access for those registered rehoming organisations to the Companion Animals Register so that we can then sort out our own paperwork internally with the correct documentation with that, of course, as well. That will be a huge time-saver, not only for the rescues but also for the council because they're not having to then process all these forms constantly for us as well.

The CHAIR: At the moment it's all paper forms for rescue organisations rather than being able to be done on the pet register and being done electronically.

TIMOTHY CROSSMAN: Yes, but there are challenges with doing it electronically as well as doing it with paperwork. I brought this up in another Q and A there was more recently about that side of it. I know that the State government likes to keep things at least having access to a paper-based system for people who can't access the online forms. Having said that, I think a lot of rescues would have that online access, and even if they were able to manage things internally that way, that would probably be a huge benefit and time-saver as well; so, yes, that's certainly a consideration, too.

The CHAIR: What do you think, running a cat rescue organisation—what sort of recommendations would you like to see from this inquiry that you think will make a real difference in the number of cats that are coming into your organisation in the first place?

TIMOTHY CROSSMAN: As a lot of other witnesses have said throughout, I think the desexing is a huge part of it. That's something that we see quite a lot that we're dealing with, especially at this time of the year when we're dealing with kittens and pregnant mums—mum and kittens coming into care. These are cats that are out on the street, un-desexed. Whether they're owned or not, they're adding to that problem, so some form of desexing program, especially for folks who are in the lower socio-economic areas where that's supported the government, through that, in my opinion, probably is the best way to navigate that one. As some of the other folks have said here, with the trap, neuter and return—not to conflate that with just dumping the cat once it's been desexed. We want to see them managed after they have been returned.

I think what we see there, from what I can see there's plenty of evidence not just in Australia but around the world, suggests that does reduce numbers over a period of time. What I would rather see is, in 10 years time, only eight cats in that colony rather than 80 cats in that colony still, or probably 800 cats in that colony by 10 years time. Yes, they will still be predating on the wildlife, but we're only looking at eight cats at that point, which should all be desexed as well. The desexing and the trap, neuter, return—those type of programs where they're still getting managed will be super important, and then the education surrounding the expectation of owing a cat in Australia. There are a lot of different understandings of how a cat should be owned. We live in a multicultural country. There are different expectations there. People need to know what the Australian expectation is and have a good understanding of that.

The CHAIR: I will throw this to any of you because I know that you're all working in that rescue space. I'll give you an example of Yarra Valley in Victoria that introduced mandatory cat containment laws. They saw an increase of euthanasia rates by 18 per cent. I imagine that's something that you're all concerned by if the same laws were brought in here. I am just wondering, do you think that the same trend would happen in New South Wales, and that we could potentially end up in the same situation as Victoria where many of these councils have a significant increase in costs and significant increase in euthanasia. What are the concerns for cat carers and rescuers in New South Wales, if this were to occur?

STEPHANIE BATES: I think that the same situation could be replicated in Sydney because it will increase pound intakes, but then that's not finite. There are only so many cats that can go to the pound. When they run out of space, that's it. If the cats aren't managed appropriately, it has ramifications for how many cats are community cats or roaming cats. There's also the issue to do with cruelty and there's also the issue to do with compliance and monitoring of it. It's completely and utterly ridiculous to think that a council with their staffing and their resource allocation is going to be policing cat enclosures, and if the cat's kept inside all the time. While it has some benefits, there's a lot of issues to do with mandatory cat containment. Certainly, the RSPCA submission goes into those very well.

The CHAIR: Does anyone else have anything else to add? If not, I'll throw to another Committee member.

ANNA HALL: I could just add that pounds are not coping at the moment. You can all get on the phone now and you won't find a pound that can take a cat in New South Wales, so to try push more in—good luck.

The CHAIR: Just to clarify that, that's because the pounds are full? They are already at capacity?

ANNA HALL: Yes. Every day I get someone calling saying, "You're the fiftieth person"—even the seventieth person I'm told I am, and I'm glad to be so far down the list—"that we've tried to surrender this cat to." There is nowhere for these extra cats, that you're going to pick up and that are not contained, to go.

STEPHANIE BATES: There is also, if I may, the public perception issue. Certainly, particular lobby groups, like the Invasive Species Council, are very official, such as the Threatened Species Commissioner, have been heavily involved in lobbying, propagandising and, especially the Invasive Special Council, seeking funding. A lot of their propagandising is done on social media and a lot of it, I think, is having an actual negative impact on the safety of cats. I think there's definitely an increase in demonisation. With the mandatory containment, people think they've got a right, "Oh, this cat's not on their property. They're not contained. Good. I'm going to trap this cat and then I'm going to do what I like with this cat. I'm going to dump them in a suburb that's 10 suburbs away. I'm going to kills them, or I'm going to take them to the pound, or I'm going to ring the ranger and they're going to be taken to the pound"—in some sort of utopic nirvana of what needs to be done.

The problem with that is most of them don't even contact the council rangers or the pounds about these cats. It would be interesting to correlate statistics of cat cruelty with what was going on in those councils—for example, the Yarra council. Having said that, there is a lot of animal cruelty that the RSPCA or the AWL inspectorate will not investigate, whether it's about resource allocation or the probability of being able to prosecute. I'm not sure, but I'd be very interested to see. Certainly anecdotally, and from TNRers' and rescuers' experiences on the ground, the amount of cat abuse has increased in the last two to three years in what we're seeing on the streets and on private properties.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Thank you all for being here. Ms Bates, you were talking about cat containment, perhaps not in urban areas but in areas that were adjacent to wildlife. Have you done any mapping? What's the difference between an urban area and a suburban area, for example?

STEPHANIE BATES: There are urban, peri-urban and non-urban areas. Are you asking me about urban areas exclusively or the difference once they meet?

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: I'm asking you, if we followed your ideas and said, "In these areas, these strategies should be in place," how do we tell? In Sydney, for example, what would be the border of the urban areas that we may not want these strategies in, and what are the peri-urban areas in which we would want containment and perhaps a range of other strategies in place to protect wildlife?

STEPHANIE BATES: I think that where housing borders national parks, bush areas and conservation areas, there could be containment for cats in those areas. And then—

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: Sorry, I'm just conscious of the time and if anybody else can contribute. Is there any mapping about this so we could say, for example, "Mandate these council areas"?

STEPHANIE BATES: Yes. I could look at a map of Sydney and say this council, this council and this council should have mandatory containment.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: So we'd say Parramatta council, The Hills Shire Council—

STEPHANIE BATES: No, not Parramatta.

The Hon. SUSAN CARTER: There's a whole ribbon of bushland that goes through Parramatta.

STEPHANIE BATES: But there are houses along it. There are heaps of people that live in Parramatta. These super-councils now are massive, and there are people that live in these super-councils that don't live anywhere near an iota of bush or bushland. It is similar in a lot of councils in Western Sydney. The other issue is once in peri-urban areas, where city and suburban fringes start to meet semi-rural areas, and certainly when I've been to areas like, say, Kemps Creek and beyond in Sydney, I will see a more diverse birdlife that I don't see in the suburbs, particularly in the western and south-western suburbs of Sydney. The wildlife in those areas is not particularly diverse, and there have been some species that I've actually seen pushed out by land clearing and development.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I have several questions, but I know I won't get them all in. Ms Riordan, sorry to come to you on this one, but you gave me a number. You said you've TNRed 710 cats. I'm looking at stats here that suggest that it could be 78,000 native animals a year that those cats are responsible for killing. Do you think that is, as you put it, just a reality of what we need now? It's part of our ecosystem.

LISA RIORDAN: Great question. The "R" for us could be rescue, rehome or return. We don't just put them back on the street.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: But that number is for pet cats. Even if they were pet cats, that's the number.

LISA RIORDAN: The 710 cats comprise cats that are living in the community that you would regard as unowned or semi-owned.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So are you okay that that could be responsible for 80,000 deaths a year of native animals?

LISA RIORDAN: I'm never going to be okay that any animal is killed, whether it be a cat or bird et cetera. But we're looking for humane methods of dealing with the situation and reducing the number of cats, and therefore reducing the amount of wildlife that is impacted. It's an interesting question that I would like to touch on. I've learned a lot about cat psychology in the time that I've been managing my own colony, which is really quite interesting. It's in an industrial area, not residential. Whilst people might not believe this, it's a group of workshops, and chaps in a couple of workshops up from me feed the birds. They actually put bowls of seed and bread and things that they probably shouldn't put out for the birds to eat. My colony comes in to feed two doors up and doesn't even blink or look at them.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Okay, that's cute, anecdotal evidence. Ms Michael, you talked about the cats you TNRed on the hospital zone, and now you're saying there are no cats—

LEAH MICHAEL: This is a long while ago

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: In that scenario, if those cats were just removed rather than being removed and put back in—

LEAH MICHAEL: Any ones that were completely tame were rehomed. I wasn't there for the whole of the finishing up of the project, but I was involved in it initially.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: My point is, though, that if these animals are just taken out of that ecosystem as the first step, rather than being taken out and put back in, we're going to have the same outcome, which is, you're saying, that there are now no colonies in that area?

LEAH MICHAEL: That was a contained area, I might add. It was a contained area at the hospital. It was within an old ward system there.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: So putting them back in was just a delaying of the removal of the cats and, as you say, the native animals killed in that time.

LEAH MICHAEL: There were plenty of possums there. I can tell you that now. Possums and cats, I've always found, got on very well together.

STEPHANIE BATES: There are a lot of birds at Callan Park. There are heaps.

LEAH MICHAEL: There's a huge area at Callan Park—absolutely huge. Most birds would steer clear, I think.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I'm happy for anyone to answer this. To what extent should taxpayers be funding these community cat colonies?

LEAH MICHAEL: They don't, currently. They're funded by individuals and groups that do the desexing. A lot of those on the street are rehomed. Sometimes some money comes back to those people but mostly not. That's part of it. The cats are fed in colonies. They're fed, usually nightly. The Government is not funding that.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: And shouldn't have to?

LEAH MICHAEL: Not that part of it, but I think there should be funding towards the desexing. The ideal would be if they're tame cats on the street, they should be rehomed. I personally don't think they should be left on the street if they're totally tame. They should be rehomed. If they're on the street, they're open to being run over by cars or people who are intending to harm them. People see them there and they sometimes disappear, so they're often harmed. The only time they should be left in a colony should be in an area where it's quite safe, but not on open streets.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Safe for cats or safe for native animals?

LEAH MICHAEL: The cats are safe but you're actually decreasing the numbers. The key is to decrease the numbers. As I was saying, in the inner west, that was very easy to do because you don't have people continually dumping them. They were in built-up areas like under shops and stuff like that, where there were no birds around.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Ms Hall, why mandate against things like abandonment and use of Gumtree and not mandate on containment? Why have you got a different approach to those two levers?

ANNA HALL: Because it is currently already the legislation. POCTAA makes it illegal to abandon an animal in New South Wales. There is just a massive problem of people abandoning animals and someone else having to come and solve that problem. We had one example of a bit of a blended family dumped outside our shelter. I couldn't see it. I was upstairs in the office. It was a heatwave. They were just dumped on concrete. They were nearly dead by the time they were found. They were in this plastic container. I was very careful and used gloves et cetera. I tried to get the police to come over to fingerprint this. They were all super friendly, with a super loving mother with two different litters.

I had to ring the police three times and eventually wanted to speak to the superintendent in charge of the station, after which they did say they would come. Then Christmas came in between, which lasted a couple of days. By the time they got there, they said, "It's too old now. The fingerprints will have denigrated." We offered them CCTV footage from outside of comings and goings. They didn't want to go through it. The type of person who is prepared to be so callous as to leave animals outside in a heatwave is not a person I want to meet in a dark alley late at night. These are people who should be followed up by the law. They have put a great expense onto us. I had to get vets over. The vet and her nurse were there till late at night tending these animals, and they survived and got rehomed.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Going off that anecdotal thing, if we have evidence of cats killing native animals, shouldn't we also, by the same token, mandate steps that we can take to minimise or prevent that, with actual evidence rather than just stories? There are plenty of stories of cats killing native animals, plus there's also evidence as well.

ANNA HALL: I dearly wish cats did not kill animals. I wish people didn't kill animals. I wish it was like that, but it's not. The system cannot cope with the outcomes that there would be from cat containment. There is nowhere for these cats to go that would be captured. People have accidents, and with the best will in the world they get out. I think the time is still where we have to push and educate, and help people with cat containment. It can be made as inexpensive as possible for people without the Government having to pay for it, with volunteers going up and helping set up frameworks and netting at really very minimal cost. I think all those things need to be tried first and worked on first. I encourage everyone who has a cat to contain that cat. I contain my cats. They have never got out. I have been at stages when there have been emergencies and I've been fostering. I've had an awful lot of cats at my place. I had three of my own—one died—and they have never got out. It's possible to do it and people need to be educated in it.

STEPHANIE BATES: If I may say, the other issue is what native and non-native species are we talking about that are being killed here? In what numbers, in what locations, in what circumstances, and by what cats—owned cats or community cats? I'd really like to know that. Give me the statistics.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: There's a wealth of evidence around that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I can say that there's a lot of it too.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: On the other side of the table, we've heard anecdotal evidence that my cat doesn't kill animals. I think I'll wrap it up there and pass on to Ms Carter.

STEPHANIE BATES: There's no wealth of evidence of that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I have a question.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I have lots of questions, but I'll just ask one to allow Ms Sue Higginson to ask hers. I have to ask a question for the people from my old home town of Campbelltown. I note that on page 5, under the heading "Annual Permit Fee for Cats not Desexed by 4 Months", your conclusion is:

> The annual permit fee was deployed to encourage desexing but in many ways it is resulting in the complete opposite.

Could you please elaborate on that? I might then ask if anyone disagrees with that and then go to Miss Higginson. Could you please tell us why that's the case?

LISA RIORDAN: There are often desexing programs that come about, supported by Campbelltown council, where a requirement of the program is to microchip and register your cat. More often than not, at the time that people are opting to do this, the cat is already older than four months of age. What is occurring as a result of the desexed permit issue is that even though they desex it, if they do desex their cat, they get an annual fee that

they're charged year after year, so they're constantly penalised even though they've done the right thing. People being aware of this just opt not to desex, not to microchip. We hear that on a regular basis. I think it's counterproductive to what we're seeking to be achieved. We're hoping to encourage people to get them desexed to avoid the procreation by four months. But it's not working out that way in a lot of situations. Most of the cats that enter the pound system are unchipped, unregistered and un-desexed.

LUDOVIC BARBIER: But still friendly.

LISA RIORDAN: But still friendly.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Do any other witnesses disagree?

TIMOTHY CROSSMAN: No. In fact, I would add that when a good Samaritan is picking a cat up off the street to look after them themselves and take them on, they didn't know the cat by four months. That's also penalising someone for doing the right thing, and what we want them to do.

LEAH MICHAEL: With rescues, the vets will actually write something that says they're rescued cats and the reason they're not actually desexed before four months is because they are rescued. That can counter that problem, basically.

LISA RIORDAN: I just think general members of the community aren't going to know that that's an opportunity for them to ask them.

LEAH MICHAEL: But that maybe needs to be discussed as well.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: We heard evidence earlier that the Bankstown council officers who are responsible for the cat programs that they run in relation to the TNR programs, there was a very clear position that the "R" must always and only be rehoming, not releasing. Their program is a very comprehensive program that they've been working on for some time. If the release is into some of the areas or the colonies—I think you refer to them as that—that get looked after, what is your vision for when those colonies no longer exist in the environment, or is it your vision that there will always be these colonies and the underlying assumption is that cats belong in the environment?

STEPHANIE BATES: My vision is that colonies will always exist. I think it's incredibly unrealistic to suggest that they won't, or that they shouldn't exist, because you're always going to have people in society that do not desex their cats, do not microchip their cats, dump their cats, people that are cruel to cats and dump owned or otherwise cats. Like I said in my submission, TNR is but one management strategy to deal with a public and private animal issue. You've got two options. You either kill the lot of them, which is what Professor Sarah Legge and others suggest, or you start doing TNR and you have responsible colonies as a way to humanely manage. Cats on the streets are always going to exist, particularly in certain suburbs, and to suggest otherwise is ridiculous. You can try to mass cull them, but you're still going to have more cats emerging, because people will still do irresponsible things. I also think the education of the public is limited. You can educate till the cows come home with focused education about responsible pet ownership, but you will still have people being irresponsible.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: For example, with dogs there is clear regulation, behaviour has changed, and we have a system. Dogs are not allowed to roam and they're not free roamers. What is the basis for suggesting that we are incapable of having any form of regulatory system that could be successful?

STEPHANIE BATES: I think the regulatory system could be expanded to include colony cats. Any regulatory system to do with how they're managed, I think there are issues to do with that. I also think there are a lot of issues to do with how a council, for example, thinks that they can educate people about responsible pet ownership.

LUDOVIC BARBIER: I would just like to point out something. Nobody at this table is happy to release a cat. I think none of us go into a colony, trap cats, neuter them and then are happy to return the cat to the colony. This is not something we want to do; this is something we have to do. I currently have eight cats in my home, all rescues. Half of them are from the colony in my street, which I have tried to rehome. I have spent three years socialising them. They live perfectly fine indoors but they can't be rehomed because of behavioural issues. I have four more in my garage right now from a colony we are doing. Three of them are kittens. We are going to do our best to rehome them because they are very young, so it's possible. One of them is a mother, which is very friendly. Trying to rehome an adult cat means months sometimes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Could you please elaborate on what you mean by behaviour? What is the supposed antisocial behaviour that makes rehoming not possible?

LUDOVIC BARBIER: It's not antisocial behaviour, it's shyness. Someone who adopts a pet generally wants companionship. They want a cat who is going to be around them and who is not going to run away when

they pet them half the time, who is going to want to be with them. A lot of colony cats have been in the colony all their life and, where they have been in contact with humans, they have not known human touch. They haven't experienced that. Some of them will turn over time. I've managed to rehome a six-year-old black cat to a family with children. The cat was very grumpy when he arrived, and six months later he was able to be petted by the toddler. So it's possible, but it's a lot of work. The problem is that TNR is the only option we have if we don't want to end up all having 10 cats in our garages waiting to be rehomed, while more cats are being bred in the street. This is the middle ground, basically.

The CHAIR: Unfortunately, we've run out of time.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Can I ask one last thing on notice? Ms Bates, you made a number of statements about your understanding and observation that the Invasive Species Council and its propaganda—I think you referred to it as propaganda—is responsible for the increase in cruelty to animals. If you could provide the Committee any evidence or anything to suggest that's the case, that would be of assistance.

STEPHANIE BATES: I will provide social media records that I've taken, for example. I can provide copies of that on notice.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Of their social media? No, I'm looking for anything that links the work of the Invasive Species Council to what you're suggesting is an increase or a prevalence of animal cruelty.

STEPHANIE BATES: How do you—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Ms Bates, that's on notice. The secretariat will be in contact with you about that, and you can provide your position once the secretariat gets in contact.

STEPHANIE BATES: I'm happy to provide that. Can I say something else?

The CHAIR: Very quickly. We are out of time, so I'll give you about 15 seconds.

STEPHANIE BATES: There's also the issue of pest management companies. I'd like to know where they fit into the grand scheme of things. Businesses are allowed to call them. They come in and they trap or get the business to trap. Where do the cats go? Are they going to the pound and getting checked for a microchip?

The CHAIR: That's outside the terms of reference of this inquiry. Thank you all for your time and for coming here today and providing evidence. Thank you for all the work you do as well. The Committee now has a break until 4.00 p.m.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

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

Ms ERICA van den HONERT, Executive Director, Sector Development, Office of Local Government, affirmed and examined

Mr RICHARD KINGSWOOD, Director, Biodiversity and Ecological Health Branch, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water, affirmed and examined

Ms JANELLE BROOKS, Director, Conservation Programs Branch, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water, affirmed and examined

Mr PETER GOTH, Acting Joint Executive Director, Strategy and Engagement, Agriculture and Biosecurity Group, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, affirmed and examined

Ms KIM FILMER, Chief Animal Welfare Officer, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, affirmed and examined

Dr STEVEN McLEOD, Manager, Vertebrate Pest Research, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome back to our inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales. I welcome our next and final panel. Thank you for coming and making the time to give evidence today. Does anyone from the Office of Local Government have a short opening statement to make?

BRETT WHITWORTH: It is more of a positioning statement, Chair. We have here representatives from across the New South Wales Government. We have representatives from the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and they are here representing their broader colleagues in the Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water; we have our colleagues from the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development; and Erica and I are here from the Office of Local Government. The Government's submission has been prepared to highlight key issues, key responsibilities and the key pieces of legislation, but does not draw any particular conclusions. We're here to help the Committee. We're here to answer any questions the Committee might have. I know this is the end of the second day of hearings, so there are probably questions that you've got coming out of previous testimony that has been given to you. We'd like to help. As I said, we are looking forward to what the Committee will give in terms of some policy direction or idea around the fairly challenging issue of cat management.

The CHAIR: If nobody else has an opening statement, I might jump in with a few questions, and I might start with Mr Whitworth. One interesting thing that has come up in this inquiry is that there are some strategies where everyone agrees, and then there are some strategies where there is really strong division. One of the strategies where there was total agreement was targeted cat desexing programs as an effective way to reduce the number of cats that are ending up homeless in the first place. I note that was also a recommendation of the Rehoming Practices Review by OLG. Are you able to provide any update as to what work or funding is being done in relation to that, given that this is something that has come up a few times?

BRETT WHITWORTH: Firstly, I think we agree that cat desexing is critical. The importance of having cats desexed from the earliest opportunity that is appropriate for the welfare of the animal is critical. That's the way in which the companion animal seeks to incentivise that. I think, though, what you're also talking about is desexing programs for the range of cats that are either owned, semi-owned, unowned or stray. That's when it starts to get a little bit more complicated, particularly in terms of how you go about—if it's about desexing for cats, where you're able to identify the population and go in and control that population, we have given funding as a government in the past to agencies like the Cat Protection Society and so on. Other than those concepts of using previous grants for companion animal organisations, we are still waiting on government policy decisions around whether there would be an ongoing series of grants in that area. Minister Hoenig, my Minister, the Minister for Local Government, gave evidence at budget estimates around a proposition that has been put through the budget process around a set of grant programs. That budget process is still evolving. I probably can't say more than that.

The CHAIR: I understand that. It's interesting, when we start talking then about mandatory cat containment—and this is where there's a lot of division. There's a lot of agreement that there should be education. In fact, I think that was an agreement across the board. The division was whether or not there are these mandatory punitive laws brought in. Those who are advocating for mandatory punitive laws are also advocating that the cost around that should be borne by the State government because we know that where that has been brought in in other States, it has been a significant cost to councils. Taking in any cat that doesn't have a home and housing those animals or even euthanising those animals comes at a significant cost. Councils have recognised that they wouldn't be able to fund the enforcement of those mandatory laws. Does the Office of Local Government have

any estimation about how much that might actually cost taxpayers to be able to give that money to councils to actually enforce those laws, if they were to bring them in?

BRETT WHITWORTH: If I could, I'd like to unpack that because I think there are two questions there. There's a question around education and the education of cat owners about their responsibilities and there's also a question there about the increased compliance process. I think that is what you're asking me, if there were laws that were introduced that made cat containment mandatory. We don't have estimates of what those costs would be. We would need to understand the scope of any program before you could come up with a reasonable set of costs. The education program would also vary in terms of the extent and scope of the reach that you need to achieve. I can tell you that the responsible pet ownership program, which is a program that we fund using the proceeds from the companion animal registration fees, is approximately a million dollars a year. It would probably be less expensive than that, but it would also depend on whether you wanted a broad-scale multimedia campaign or whether we're talking more targeted materials for councils to have available at the counter, as an example.

In terms of the costs of compliance, I just don't have the ability to start analysing that until we have an understanding of the consequences and the methods and how widespread it would be. Councils would need to be increasing ranger services. They would need to be looking at their pounds and the operation of their pounds. If you talk about increased cat containment, by default you're saying that any cat that is not contained is therefore subject to potential capture, then impoundment, then going through a rehoming process and, if that's unsuccessful, looking at euthanasia. There are quite considerable costs to that. As I said, extra rangers, extra pound facilities and a change to the way pound facilities operate, looking at the rehoming networks and how they operate and then the euthanisation process. I know that there have been previous inquiries—the vet shortage in New South Wales—that have talked about some of the challenges in that regard.

The CHAIR: Talking about that euthanasia rate as well, we were given evidence about how much the euthanasia rate has increased in council areas in Victoria where they have brought in cat containment laws. One council saw an 18 per cent increase in euthanasia rates in correlation with those cat containment laws coming in. I know OLG has been working quite a lot over the last few years to try to bring those euthanasia rates down and has been somewhat successful in doing so, which is good. Are you concerned, then, that if we suddenly flip that and see a large increase in euthanasia rates, it will have flow-on effects further on into those areas such as the vet shortage and the pound crisis and some of these are other areas that we're looking into?

BRETT WHITWORTH: In short, yes. In the government's submission, particularly at—there are no page numbers, so I can't draw you to the page number. In relation to pound data, we know that in 2023-24, of cats entering a pound facility, only 6 per cent were returned to their owners, which speaks to a very low microchip rate, and 66 per cent were rehomed, which is a really good stat, but 28 per cent were euthanised. You would only expect that number to increase. I don't know whether my DPIRD colleagues, because they have responsibility for the veterinary process, have any comment that they would like to make.

KIM FILMER: I have nothing to add to that.

The CHAIR: I also noted that the submission from the Office of Local Government stated, "Mandated 24-hour cat containment policies may raise concerns relating to cat welfare and breaches of POCTAA." I'm just wondering if you could expand a little bit further on that, specifically what POCTAA breaches are a concern.

BRETT WHITWORTH: Can I also clarify that this is the government submission. This is the joint submission from the New South Wales Government. It was submitted by the Office of Local Government, but it was prepared with input from all of the agencies that you see here today. I know intuitively that the more you hold a cat the greater the pressure is on its welfare. I think that's what that statement was going to.

KIM FILMER: Would you mind just repeating the question, please?

The CHAIR: Absolutely. The submission stated, "Mandated 24-hour cat containment policies may raise concerns relating to cat welfare and breaches of POCTAA."

KIM FILMER: I think that's in relation to the fact that, if you do contain a cat, you are then required to provide it with some sort of stimulation and entertainment, I guess. By locking a cat in a room, for example, without anything to do, there's a chance that the cat would have a poor welfare outcome in terms of it getting bored. Most people have a cat in the house, and so there's usually plenty of things for it to do. I think it was in relation to the fact that it's known that cats do require some stimulation but that can be provided within a contained environment like a house.

The CHAIR: We heard this morning about gene drive technology, but we also heard that it is at least a decade away from being realised. Further witnesses said that there were potentials around immunocontraceptives for cats as well, which will be much sooner than gene technology, which is a little bit further away. I'm wondering

if anyone knows about any funding that's going into research in this space and how close or how far we are away from this gene drive technology but also the immunocontraceptives that were also mentioned.

STEVEN McLEOD: I could talk initially about the gene drive work that's been done on cats specifically. There's been work done by the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions in conjunction with the University of Adelaide. They have done modelling on the impacts of gene drive on cat populations—modelling how long it would take before the population started dropping and how long it would take before that localised population became extinct. As far as I'm aware, there is no further funding to develop this technology, apart from the modelling, so at the moment that's theoretical. I'm unclear what work you're referring to in terms of immunocontraception. Is there something that was raised?

The CHAIR: Yes, two witnesses who came in during the morning sessions talked about the immunocontraceptive potential for cats as well. They thought that was a closer technology to the gene drive technology, but that was the only information. I can put further questions to them on notice.

STEVEN McLEOD: I'm not aware of any immunocontraceptive work going on at the moment. I could take that on notice and talk to my colleagues to see whether there's anything there.

The CHAIR: I appreciate that.

JANELLE BROOKS: I can add that, as part of the National Parks and Wildlife Service cat control program, we're also contributing material to the University of Melbourne to support the gene drive research that's being undertaken there. We're providing the reproductive material from the cats that are being culled out in those national parks.

The CHAIR: Mr Whitworth, when we heard from Local Government NSW, they indicated support for a change to the legislation that would allow councils to bring in mandated cat containment laws, but they also gave evidence that they realised that no council is currently ready to implement them. Do you see that as a potential issue? If the legislation changes but no council is in a position currently to be able to implement them, does that work need to be done before the legislation changes so that councils can be prepared if they went down that road?

BRETT WHITWORTH: If the legislation was changed, I would be strongly advocating for a long lead time between it changing and commencing so that there is adequate time to prepare. I'd also say that the simple mandating of cat containment needs additional thought around how does it relate to pet and cat registration fees. Funding will be a critical element of this. If councils are seeking additional funds—and I know they are—the current process by which the companion animals registration fees are being distributed on a pro rata basis I don't think really serves anyone, because it advantages the larger councils. I know you had Blacktown in this morning. I think they receive the largest amount of animal registration fees. I dare say they would have said to you that they need more.

There are also councils in regional areas, where they are dealing with quite challenging socio-economic environments, that need more of the pie to help them improve their enforcement mechanisms, their pounds and their ability to educate their community. That's going to come from a policy decision of the Government to allocate more money into this space. That is genuinely a policy decision of government, because it would need to take into account what other things they are not going to spend on. It would also require a consideration as to whether there would be a greater emphasis on owners of cats and owners of dogs as well as to how their obligations as pet owners are addressed and enforced, and that the infrastructure that supports their choice to be a responsible pet owner is also well funded.

The CHAIR: You mentioned the impact on lower socio-economic backgrounds, and that's something we heard a lot about, particularly from RSPCA NSW. They had equity issues associated with mandated laws. Does the OLG share some of those concerns—that there may be other portfolios that are impacted and would need to be brought into that kind of decision?

BRETT WHITWORTH: It absolutely is. I think if you look at some of the funding that we've given to organisations previously—as a particular example, Lucy's Project is one where there is a clear understanding of a link between domestic violence and mistreatment of animals. The poor rate at which animals are (a) microchipped, (b) identified in the system, and (c) registered also has a focus on socio-economic conditions. I think the Assistant Coroner, in her various coronial inquiries into dog attacks, has drawn out that connection between poor socio-economic status and an understanding of the responsibilities of owning a pet.

The CHAIR: What we heard quite a bit from all the groups that we heard from was that there was no real research at this point in time that shows that mandatory cat containment works. There was some early research that the education seems to be working, but there wasn't any research that showed that mandating it was reducing the number of cat complaints, nor was it reducing the amount of wildlife that was killed. I just want to find out if

anybody had seen any other research or whether the evidence that we had received that there doesn't seem to be any research out there is correct.

BRETT WHITWORTH: There are a lot of experts on this panel from both a biodiversity and a threat abatement perspective around feral animals. I'll throw to one of my colleagues to step in.

STEVEN McLEOD: I'm happy to talk about the reduction of impacts to the environment.

The CHAIR: From mandated—

STEVEN McLEOD: From containment of cats. You're correct that there's no research that's been done. The impact that is believed to happen is extrapolated from other work that's shown that cats can have predation impacts on particular prey species. The type of experiment that would need to be done, which would include long-term monitoring, has not been done yet. I believe that has not been done in Victoria, which has had mandatory cat containment for a very long time in areas, or in other areas in New South Wales where there has also been cat containment, or in Canberra where there's been cat containment. It would be timely.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: We've got DPI, Local Government and National Parks. I note LLS isn't here. Is there any cross-government tenure-neutral strategy that we're working towards to manage cats?

BRETT WHITWORTH: I think there are a number of strategies around the management of feral pests. There are various strategies, as we put in our submission—the Saving our Species program, feral cat management programs and Environmental Trust grant programs. There are a number of those. Also, quite recently—and correct me if I'm wrong—the Natural Resources Commission also looked at the issue of the impact of predation on native fauna.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: But at this stage there's no statewide cat management strategy.

PETER GOTH: Not statewide, but I think Dr McLeod could talk about the types of strategies that we operate very closely with LLS.

STEVEN McLEOD: And National Parks. We're still completing a very long-term, large-scale experiment looking at the management of feral cats in broadscale regional areas which have an impact on the environment. This is world-leading research. I'm not aware of anything that even comes close to the scale and magnitude of this type of research. The results are being analysed at the moment, and the project's report should be submitted at the end of this year. Part of that work is developing management strategies that could be applied broadscale for the management of cats. They've had to take a very careful approach because what has been used in other parts of Australia it wasn't clear would work or could have undesired impacts in New South Wales, particularly on the eastern seaboard. The experiment itself was done in a staged technique where they were looking at a number of techniques and seeing whether they would work or not work and what could be done to improve those.

At the moment I can't really speak about the final strategies that will come up with because they haven't finished the analysis and the write-up of the report, but I'm encouraged that we will be in a much better position to have an idea on how to manage cats in the environment. What I can say about the research is—what's clear is that we will need to do more research. It's not just because I'm a scientist and a researcher myself that I'm saying we need to do more research; it's that it has brought up some questions which we weren't able to answer and which have not been answered in other parts of Australia.

JANELLE BROOKS: I can add to that, if you like.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: My question is more about the Government approach. You guys are working together to come up with a strategy on this, having heard it's an OLG problem, it's a DPI problem, it's an LLS problem and it's a National Parks problem.

JANELLE BROOKS: I can add from the strategic context. There is a national Feral Cat Taskforce, as you'd be aware, and predation by feral cats is listed as a threatening process at both a Commonwealth and a State level. It's also one of those unique feral animals to the point where it actually poses a threat to the environment, to human health and to agriculture. There's also a revised national threat abatement plan that came into effect. I think it was one of the first that was the Federal Government's that was agreed to by all States. I also note that feral cats are identified as a priority pest animal in all 11 regional strategic pest animal management plans in New South Wales. That means, at a regional level, that involves all the agencies and stakeholders. They've been identified as a priority for management by all of the participants in those, so it is something, I think, where there is a lot of agreement and cooperation.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Given that recognition as a priority pest—I'll come to you, Mr Goth—has there been any use of the Biosecurity Act as far as controlling of cats? I'm sure cats would have a biosecurity impact.

PETER GOTH: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Therefore, efforts should be made by people to prevent, minimise or eliminate the risk. Some of the things we've heard about this morning are probably the opposite of that.

PETER GOTH: Yes. In terms of has there been a prosecution using the Biosecurity Act, I can't answer that. I'm happy to take that on notice. I think the thing I'd probably try and explain in relation to the question about a statewide strategy is, the way that the Local Land Services Act works, the structure is that, essentially, the planning and the strategies happen at the regional level. Probably, the 11 regions would have their own type of feral cat management strategies. Therefore, you wouldn't necessarily be seeing a statewide one, but you would have feral cats and cat management picked up in those 11 ones. The answer to your question probably is that there's not one, but there's 11.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Sorry, that was meant to be a very quick question prompted by the range of people here. Again, we've heard of this trap, neuter, release thing this morning. Has anyone any evidence to support that as an approach—probably to Dr McLeod?

STEVEN McLEOD: There have been a lot of published studies on trap, neuter, release, and the weight of evidence is quite clear. This is taking into account international studies and the small number of studies that have been done in Australia. There are a number of factors which need to be met for trap, neuter, release to be an effective tool, and they are that the colony size, initially, must be small. They've taken a guide of less than 10 individuals, so quite a small-sized colony. A very high proportion of the animals within that colony need to be sterilised, and that needs to exceed 75 per cent. In some cases, it's had to exceed 90 per cent. The population itself has to be closed. That means there's no immigration into the population. For almost all cat populations in Australia, except for a few unusual ones, that requirement can't be met, and that in itself usually undermines the goal and the outcomes of trap, neuter, release.

The fourth one is that there needs to be continual monitoring because what's been clear in the published studies—this is in the empirical evidence of the experiments that were run—is that the sites themselves, which were controlled, became targets for new individuals to move into. They also became targets for human-assisted movement of animals to be moved in—the dumping of cats within those areas—once it became known that trap, neuter, release was going on at those sites. Really, if we look at those things, the only viable situation is probably an urban environment where you can have quite close control over the populations themselves. In most other populations, we're not going to be able to achieve either a high proportion of sterilisation, if it's a feral population, or that the population itself is closed, and all of these things themselves undermine it. This work is also supported by modelling—many examples where trap, neuter, release has not met the goals of either reducing the population size or even stabilising it in some cases.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Can I just ask you to qualify something? When you started, you said an "effective tool", but an effective tool for what?

STEVEN McLEOD: In terms of pest management, we talk about minimising damage. It's not so much the number of animals, but we try to reduce the damage that occurs. In terms of cat predation, even low numbers of cats can cause a high amount of damage because they prey upon vulnerable species. In terms of looking at the tools available to us, at the moment we have poisoning, shooting and trapping, and most trapping is followed up by euthanasia—so lethal techniques. But we also have containment, which has been brought up here, and trap, neuter, release, which has been suggested as an alternative. We need to evaluate it in terms of is it effective, and is it achieving the goals such as reducing damage? In most cases, it won't, and there are a couple of reasons. The first, immediate reason is because the method is not increasing mortality, the animals that are released back into the site they were taken from initially can still prey upon other species, and it won't be until those animals die that we see a reduction in that. For neutered animals, that can be quite a protracted period—many years.

PETER GOTH: Biosecurity as well.

STEVEN McLEOD: And the biosecurity issues as well. It's not just that those individuals will be preying; a good point to bring up is that they can also transmit diseases, and they also carry a parasite burden which can be transmitted to other animals.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Is it fair to say then—sorry, I was just thrown a bit there because my understanding so far, in looking at the data and the material that is available, is that the trap, neuter, release programs are actually not effective. The material is suggesting that they're really not effective. If the object is to reduce the harm on native wildlife, we just don't have—I'm seeing nodding heads. I just got a bit thrown with that proposition, but I think I'm fairly clear on that. Sorry, Scott. You carry on.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: What is then considered best practice? You mentioned a few options there, but what are we looking at for the best practice of management of cat numbers? That possibly varies from urban situations to within national parks, so that might be a question of a couple of different people.

STEVEN McLEOD: I'll start. Our main tool is still toxic baits. They can be delivered cost effectively, and we know they're efficient. The problem is that not all cats take baits, so we need to look at additional methods in particular areas. What we don't at the moment have is a broadscale tool that we can use. We have individual tools which can be used on a smaller scale to protect high-value assets, but they tend to be unusual situations. My National Parks colleagues can talk about these as well. They might be an area where you fence the area to exclude cats, and you want to remove all the cats or any other predators from within there. These methods work well within those contained areas. It's a lot of effort but it can be done on a broad scale. We're still no closer to having the magic bullet. We don't have one, so there's still a lot of work to do there.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Are we making improvements and developments in that space?

STEVEN McLEOD: We are. Even understanding what doesn't work is important. Methods that have worked successfully for foxes and dogs—and this is what was trialled first with the feral cat project—are thought to work for cats because cats are more difficult to work on. Because they're more difficult to work on, they're more expensive to work on. We have, in some regards, assumed that the results that worked for other predators also work for cats, and that hasn't quite been the case. What we have learnt is where it doesn't work, and that's very important to understand because it gives us the impetus to look for alternatives.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Does National Parks want to add to that?

RICHARD KINGSWOOD: To follow up on what Steve's just mentioned, certainly some of the standard techniques—things like baiting, shooting and trapping—can deliver localised effects, but they're not often long term or they need to be sustained to be kept long term. So that requires a significant effort. You can do that in places where you might have a localised threatened species population that are range restricted and the like. Moreover, some of the other techniques that we're employing now are some of the larger fenced, feral-free area projects that we're establishing right across New South Wales. We've got 10 that are established or in the process of being established now. With conservation fencing and an eradication program inside that fenced area, you can remove the feral predators and know then that you've got a safe environment to reintroduce species that were once there but are now no longer. We've done that to very good effect across New South Wales across the national park estate. Certainly, more broadly in Australia, there are significant examples of that occurring as well.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: When we're talking about something like this intervention, the intervention around containment, in that sort of scenario we are looking at a spike in investment, and then we're going to have a spike in captures and cats going into pounds and that sort of stuff. But surely the long-term goal is that once that initial intervention has had its impact, the numbers of roaming cats come down because there are less cats to join those communities. Is this an initial spike that we aim to gradually decrease the impact of over time?

BRETT WHITWORTH: That's quite a hypothetical question. In order to answer that, you've got to assume you are 100 per cent effective in containing and capturing cats. If you're not 100 per cent effective and you have populations that are still increasing, you still need to maintain that effort to reduce the impact. It's a good question to ask, but I don't know that anyone here necessarily has the answer on that because we also don't know the full extent of feral cats. As I said, you've got four types of cat ownership: owned cats, semi-owned cats, strays and then feral cats. Cat containment works for owned cats. It might work for semi-owned cats. Then once you're into strays and ferals, you've got to be talking about other strategies.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I want to ask a few simple questions. There seems to be quite a lot of consensus around desexing as one of the tools in the toolkit when it comes to reducing the numbers of cats. Given that support for desexing and the knowledge of how expensive it is for the average person to desex an animal, what sort of work has the Government done so far around modelling or planning any sort of desexing program that would help those who can't afford to desex a cat?

BRETT WHITWORTH: Ms Boyd, I don't know whether any of my colleagues are going to touch that one, so it's probably me. We haven't done a lot of work. There was the draft report by CIE that looked at some of those issues, but it didn't go very far. I suppose we have been looking at this more from an opportunistic perspective rather than a programmatic perspective. If one of the recommendations from the inquiry is to look at that from a programmatic perspective, then obviously we would do that and look at it. There are some inherent subsidies in the registration process for an incentive to have cats desexed. If you have a desexed cat, you get the benefit of a lifetime registration. If you don't have a desexed cat, then you need to pay an annual registration fee.

As part of the broader Companion Animals Act review, the question needs to be asked as to whether that's been effective. That will certainly be something that we'd be looking at from submissions. The next step from that would be what are the other options to increase that desexing, and should we be more actively funding it. I don't know that it would be a government program, as in we'd have to look at doing what we've been doing now and utilising other third-party providers like the Cat Protection Society.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Some people have suggested the idea of a voucher system or something similar—going through Service NSW and getting a bit of a discount on pet desexing. I'm not sure I necessarily subscribe to that. But in terms of there being a less punitive and more generous approach to assisting people to not only desex but also microchip and register their animals, has that been actively considered or are we waiting for the Companion Animals Act review?

BRETT WHITWORTH: I think we're waiting for the Companion Animals Act review, as well as any advice coming out of this inquiry, before formalising or moving forward on any further analysis. The idea of a voucher system does have merit, just as the idea of providing grants to third-party organisations to undertake mass desexing also has merit. But, again, it's a question of who pays and how we fund that. If it's the government paying then we'll need to come up with a rational cost approach to put to government as to what the benefits are, what the costs are and how it will be managed.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I wanted to ask about the trap, neuter and release issues and what there's evidence for or not for. It seems to me that it depends on what you are assessing it in relation to. If, for example, you were looking at trap, neuter and release as an alternative to all other cat management policies, you might get a different assessment of its efficacy versus if you were using it in comparison to—I don't know where I'm going with this. I'll start again. I know that there are groups who would like to desex animals and release them, rather than necessarily having them adopted, as an alternative to putting them down. They see the prohibition on trap, neuter and release as being an obstacle to desexing. If we compare trap, neuter and release as a last resort—allowing that desexing to occur—with not having any desexing at all, has the efficacy of TNR been looked at? It's a clumsy question, but I think you know what I'm getting at.

BRETT WHITWORTH: I do. When people put to the Office of Local Government that trap, neuter, release is an effective approach, what they are really saying is that they believe it is an effective way to achieve a high number of desexings within the cat populations, which then means that you are reducing the number of cats and the population growth. But, as you put it, the measure of success there is the number of new litters; whereas, for my colleagues, the measure of success for some of their programs is about the reduction in predation.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Putting it the other way, instead of embracing TNR as a technique for reducing the number of cats in a particular area, we could instead at least remove the prohibition on TNR to allow those people to desex cats that wouldn't otherwise be getting desexed, adopted or anything else. Has consideration been given to that in terms of it being an obstacle to people voluntarily going and desexing cats that otherwise would be just roaming around?

BRETT WHITWORTH: I think Dr Filmer is keen to address that.

KIM FILMER: We have talked about wildlife and we have talked about the effectiveness of reducing the population. The thing that hasn't been talked about here is the welfare of those animals. You've got the welfare of the animals that are then released. This morning, somebody spoke about catching them, desexing them, vaccinating them and then releasing them. The vaccine is not going to work because they need to have two shots. You're not going to catch a cat a second time in a cat trap. That is a problem in terms of disease control and biosecurity. The welfare of cats that are released is suboptimal, I would say.

Cats are a domestic species. They rely on people and should rely on people to survive, or they are feral and are relying on wildlife. By releasing them again, you've got two major welfare issues. One is the welfare of the cat that you have released. You've then also got the welfare of the wildlife that it will predate on. If somebody owns the cat, is caring for it and is feeding it, it can still eat wildlife, but it's not reliant on it as its source of food. If an animal is released and it doesn't have an owner or it doesn't have someone who can put their hand on it to care for it, then that animal is at significant risk in terms of animal welfare, as well as for the wildlife that it predates on. From an animal welfare point of view, I don't think anybody has addressed that concern in what I have listened to today. From a welfare point of view, that is the concern.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: On the back of that, the alternative is catching them and killing them. If you have got a situation where there is no-one willing to adopt that cat, the alternative to releasing it back, desexed and unable to create more cats to prey on wildlife, is just killing it. That will also mean it won't be able to prey on wildlife. I guess we just need to be honest about that, if what we are saying is that it is better to kill the cat than it is to release it, desexed, into the community. Is that your view?

KIM FILMER: I think on balance that is the view. There is no perfect solution here. This is a difficult, wicked problem. There are lots of factors. You've got lots of different types of cats. You probably need a tailored solution for each of the four groups of cats that we talked about today. There is no simple solution. Unfortunately, evidence this morning confirmed—and I am sure that the National Parks and Wildlife Service would confirm it as well—that there are too many cats, full stop. By definition, we have to reduce the number back to a level that will have less impact on their welfare and the welfare of wildlife. If you try to balance all of those things out and think it through, unfortunately, as much as we might not like to think about it, it probably is going to be the best thing for some of those animals, particularly the feral cats, the unowned cats or the semi-owned cats. Unless they can become owned cats, it is probably going to be the best solution in terms of trying to get the number of cats down to a level that is manageable and sustainable and has less impact on wildlife.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I have one final question. Sorry, I know I am hogging time. If that is the case—and we do all agree that there are too many cats, and I don't think I have heard anyone say that they don't think that—there aren't enough homes to adopt all of these cats, particularly the domesticated, semi-owned ones. Presumably, stopping people from farming new cats and kittens would be a really effective way of reducing the numbers of new cats and the need to create more homes for the cats that are already out there. Was that considered when the Government was bringing in its recent laws to ban puppy farms but not kitten farms? Is there more work to be done to ban kitten farms?

KIM FILMER: That's something that can be looked at. If you look at the statistics that the RSPCA and Animal Welfare League provide, they have very, very few kitten farming prosecutions, compared with puppy farming prosecutions. The stats are mainly backing up the fact that puppy farming is more of a problem in terms of producing unwanted puppies than kitten farming, as such. There are a lot of people who have accidental litters of kittens. That is a different thing.

If you are talking about kitten farming as such, the driver for puppy farming, particularly during COVID, was the high price of puppies. The price of kittens didn't get to the same level. The price driver, in terms of people wanting to set up puppy farms or kitten farms, if that's what you want to call them, is different. Dogs were getting high values, during COVID particularly. They are worth more. There is a money driver there for people to breed lots of them to sell them. There is not that same driver for the cats because cats aren't, as a general rule, as expensive as dogs. There is not the financial gain available, as a driver, for people to set up kitten farms. I am not saying they don't exist, but in terms of the numbers, if you look at the risk profile, there is much less evidence to say that kitten farms are a problem. If you look at the RSPCA and Animal Welfare League stats, they support that.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I will ask follow up supplementary questions. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I want to ask a quick clarifying question as well. I feel like we are hearing a little bit different evidence today, compared with the evidence that we heard in the last two days of hearings. We are hearing from organisations that are supportive of trap-and-neuter programs. They are not talking about truly wild cats. They are never talking about cats that are living in native forest areas or anything like that. They are usually talking about cats that are living in industrial areas and urban environments. That is where they are running those programs. Of course, there was a lot of criticism around the word "release" because they are not just releasing cats. They are continuing their care for them. My clarifying question is to Dr Filmer about welfare when we are talking about not releasing a cat into some sort of native forest or anything, but rather that those cats are continuing to be cared for and continuing to get veterinary treatment and are continuing to be fed but are living in, say, an industrial complex, rather than locked inside a house. My first question is about the welfare.

My second question is to Dr McLeod. You mentioned that research. The organisations we have been talking to have also talked a lot about that research, but they are talking about those more urban environments. They are saying that they are not proposing to do any of these programs for truly wild cats, but rather for much more contained groups of cats. They are making sure that if there are any other contained groups nearby, the desexing programs happen concurrently so those contained areas can all be desexed. Is your research backing some of that in terms of what those groups are then saying about those urban environments—that there could be a benefit, but that there is no benefit when you start looking at truly wild populations?

KIM FILMER: You have to, again, think this through carefully. If you have to trap the cat in the first place, then the cat's going to be difficult to be provided with ongoing care. So the fact that it's called trap, neuter and release, in itself, is a concern because, if the cat's coming in for food but it's not quite enough that somebody can actually catch it—and you've got to trap it to then desex it, and then presumably release it again—that ongoing situation means that if it gets sick, if it gets its eyeball scratched out by a tomcat down the road or if something else happens to it, the person that's caring for it and has affection for it, or feeds it occasionally, is not then going to be able to catch it to provide it with veterinary care. So you've immediately got a welfare problem. If the cat's not tame enough that you can catch it to provide it with care—if it's not in a domestic situation enough that it can

be cared for—then, by definition, the welfare of that animal is going to be compromised in an ongoing sense. That's a concern from an animal welfare point of view.

STEVEN McLEOD: I think the highly urban situation that you described is as close as possible to the criteria which I outlined. In this situation it might be successful. I'm cautious to actually make that conclusion, as well, based on the evidence of empirical studies from around the world where their claim as to success was that they reduced the size of the cat population. In the review of the literature, you really need to interpret what was the mechanism of that reduction. Some of the studies imply that the neutering itself was the mechanism of the reduction and those animals died naturally. The reality is quite different. In all studies where they've shown a reduction in the size of the population, there was a substantial proportion of the animals rehomed. As you would understand, that works in the same way as removing the animal or euthanising the animal. It's no longer present at that site. My criteria in terms of success would be based on is it reducing the size of the cat population, but I also accept that other stakeholders might have different criteria for how they judge success.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Dr McLeod, when you talked about the broad experiment that's happening, who were the participants and the research partners? Who has been involved in that?

STEVEN McLEOD: The experiment itself was led by DPI. We worked very closely with National Parks and also with the University of New England. It was funded by the Environmental Trust in New South Wales.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: And that will be released at some point later this year?

STEVEN McLEOD: That's right.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I'd like to ask National Parks a question. What is the current situation in some of our really high biodiversity areas across particularly, say, the north and different areas where we've got higher, denser populations and urban encroachment onto some of our high-biodiversity regions—Blue Mountains, North Coast and those sorts of places that adjoin your tenured estate as well? Are you engaging in particular strategies with neighbours or with those councils? Could you just share some of that experience?

JANELLE BROOKS: So you're talking about the impact of domestic or those semi-owned cats on fauna?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Yes, precisely. Whatever we want to call them—cats.

JANELLE BROOKS: It is an issue and, obviously, where we look at our cat control programs, we're looking at removing cats from national parks. In those more urban areas, that will involve, if it's an owned cat, obviously finding the owner. That's a complexity for us. I don't know whether you want to add to that, Richard.

RICHARD KINGSWOOD: It probably goes back to the range of strategies that we spoke about before as well. Obviously, where you've got that peri-urban environment, you can be faced with a range of different impacts. It could be everything from cats or other domestic animals, and there are weeds and all sorts of things as well. It's a difficult operating environment. Certainly, where cats and the impacts of cats are concerned, we're looking at focusing in on some of our control programs there.

We also now have utilisation of things like the declaration of assets of intergenerational significance as well. We declare areas where we have known habitat for threatened species, so it's a declared area, which is an increased level of protection from whatever the threat might be. We will implement programs to mitigate the particular threat. In many cases—I think 22 of our 111 conservation action plans have cats listed as a key threat. We implement actions to address the threat of the cats, and then we're monitoring to determine whether or not that management is having a positive effect on the threatened species that we're trying to protect in those areas. Again, it's a range of different techniques, and you've also picked up liaising with local councils and others as well. In some places we are doing that at a local level, but in other places, yes, that's a challenging environment too.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I'll put some questions on notice. But just finally, earlier Canterbury council were suggesting that there's a desperate need for an overarching regulatory framework that starts with the fact that cats do need to be controlled, full stop, and shifting from the current vacuum of a regulatory framework that basically doesn't provide for that kind of change in human behaviour around cats, to change the assumption that cats are just this strange animal that gets to roam—dogs don't and nothing else does, but cats do—and that this overarching regulatory framework is really necessary. Within your agencies, have you come up against the absence of particular frameworks within the current regulation?

BRETT WHITWORTH: I think that's probably a question for me to take, given that the containment of cats—dealing with cats from a threat abatement and a feral management perspective, I think my colleagues have identified their responses. If you're talking about cat containment, you would be talking about a fundamental change to the Companion Animals Act. As you say, cats have a different status to dogs. What I would say to you and to the Committee is, if you're going to make a recommendation around that—and that's one of the reasons

why the Government has referred this to the Committee—there is more than just a legislative process. There's an educative and a financial process that needs to be considered in order to implement that and implement that effectively.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I know we're out of time but, just with the cost assessment, where is the factoring in of the evidence we've received about the $2 billion a year on disease? Are those cost equations happening in terms of the regulatory response, whether proposed or explored? Are those other costs being factored into any position or discussion, as well as the costs of all of the control programs and strategies and the cost, obviously, of losing wildlife? Are those factors something that is already being considered internally?

BRETT WHITWORTH: As you can see from the Government's submission, there's a lot of debate around that. The costs of the various programs that my colleagues have identified are a cost that is being borne right now by the Government as a result of policies around cat management. Certainly, if there would be an introduction of new policies and an expectation that the Government would pay, that would be part of that cost-benefit assessment that would need to occur. But is there someone weighing that—we're going to have more cats on the on the street, but we'll pay for it through threat abatement plans? No-one's doing that, but it certainly would be something that would be considered as part of the process of making any legislative, regulatory and budgetary decisions to implement.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for your time today and for coming to give evidence. There were some questions taken on notice, which the secretariat will be in contact with you about. I know that there'll be members with further questions on notice, which they'll be in contact with you about as well. That brings us to the end of our inquiry today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 17:05.