

28 June 2024

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
GPO Box 858 Canberra ACT 2601



To whom it may concern,

Submission in response to the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy Consultation

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission in response to the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy consultation.

The Lost Dogs' Home (LDH) is the largest animal shelter in Victoria, caring for around 18,000 animals, mostly cats and dogs, every year. Our vision is to give animals the best chance of a happy and healthy life. This means providing the highest standard of care for the animals that come to us.

The LDH submission covers the following areas of the strategy:

- Vision
- Proposed workstreams
- Challenges
- Opportunities

Vision

Question 1: Does this vision statement reflect everything you feel an Australian Animal Welfare Strategy should aim to achieve?

The Human Animal Bond is the relationship that companion animals have with their owners. This bond can have mental and physical health and wellbeing benefits for pets and their owners. It can also contribute to significantly improving the health of people in crisis situations, such as homelessness, where people can rely on their pets for support (Oosthuizen et al, 2023).

The Five Domains Model for animal welfare consists of five areas including Nutrition, Environment, Health, Behaviour and Mental State. In the Five Domains Model, mental health is significantly influenced by the other four domains. It covers negative and positive experiences of mental health such as pain, fear and distress as well as safety, security, affection and contentment (Mellor, 2017).

The LDH believes the vision should focus on the human animal bond and the five domains model to show why it is important to value the welfare of companion animals (and animals associated with agricultural industries). It further highlights the importance of changing attitudes to companion animal ownership.

Proposed Workstreams

Question 2a: Are there other priority areas that you think are important and should be added to the strategy?

The numbers of companion animals in Australia have increased significantly. The Victorian Pet Census estimated that there are 4.4 million pets in Victoria. It is estimated that 56% of Victorian adults owned a pet, which equals 1.4 million Victorian households.

The workstreams outlined in the strategy are primarily focused on animals in agricultural and commercial industries. The LDH believes that a prevention workstream should be included in the strategy. It is vital to be able to achieve positive animal welfare outcomes for companion animals.

A prevention workstream will lead to a nationally agreed focus on changing attitudes and improving animal welfare outcomes for companion animals. This includes increasing the community awareness of the importance of the human animal bond and incorporating the five domains approach. Key strategies for the prevention workstream include the following:

Reduce the number of companion animals abandoned or surrendered to shelters and pounds

Every year, tens of thousands of companion animals come into shelters and pounds across Australia. In the last five years, the LDH has admitted over 85,000 companion animals, which have mostly been cats and dogs. In the last six months of 2023, the LDH admitted 8,438 companion animals including 5,200 cats and 3,238 dogs.

The increase in the length of the cat breeding season across Australia, is leading to shelters and pounds seeing growing numbers of cats and kittens admitted throughout the year.

This strategy should focus on supporting the desexing of companion animals to improve health and welfare and reduce the opportunity for breeding and an increase in numbers. It should also focus on supporting pet owners who are on low incomes, who may not be able to care for their pets because of the cost of living crisis.

Increase the number of companion animals reclaimed from shelters and pounds.

Shelters and pounds also see high numbers of numbers of cats that are not reclaimed every year. Based on Victorian Animal Fate data for the LDH, in the six months from January to June 2023, 58 per cent of dogs were reclaimed compared to only 7 per cent for cats. Increasing the reclaim rates involves encouraging companion animal owners to register, microchip and desex their pets.

Challenges

Question 4: What do you think are the biggest challenges facing Australia's animal welfare system?

Animal welfare is primarily a state and territory responsibility, providing challenges to a harmonized approach to decision-making.

There are two main challenges for Australia's animal welfare system:

1. Improve collaboration and communication to enhance companion animal welfare and welfare of owners across all levels of government.
2. Develop consistent legislative and regulation for companion animals across all States and Territories.

These issues will be addressed in more detail in the response to Question 7 in the discussion paper.

Question 5: Are there additional challenges in the animal welfare system that have not been listed above, which the renewed strategy should consider?

The current priority focus of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) is on animals in agriculture including trade and commercial industries and to a much lesser degree on companion animal welfare.

The LDH believes that the Minister for Agricultural, Fisheries and Forestry should appoint a Ministerial advisor for companion animal welfare to bring the correct level of focus to this increasingly critical area of animal welfare. The advisor will work with State and Territory Governments, through the Ministerial Council on Agriculture, which reports to National Cabinet annually on workplans.

The aim of this approach is to work with State and Territory Governments to change attitudes towards pet ownership, recognise the importance and health and wellbeing values of the human animal bond and raise visibility on companion animal welfare issues of national importance, such as affordable veterinary care.

The LDH also believes that the role of the Animal Health Division of the DAFF should be changed to include a specific focus on companion animal welfare.

In addition, the Office of Chief Veterinary Officer for Australia, should include companion animal welfare as part of its role to improve Australia's animal health status. This will reflect the significant role that the veterinary sector plays in companion animal welfare.

Question 7: Are there additional opportunities for improvements in the animal system that have not been listed above, which the renewed strategy should consider?

The following recommendations are based on three of the key streams outlined in the discussion paper: Leadership and Coordination, Standards and Implementation and Research and Development.

Leadership and Coordination

Vaccines and essential preventative treatments

Shelters, pounds and veterinary practices across Australia are reliant on commercial entities for the supply of vaccines and preventative treatments for companion animals.

The recent example of the F3 cat vaccine shortage across Australia demonstrates that commercial suppliers cannot always ensure the security of supply. The F3 cat vaccine protects against feline panleukopenia, feline calicivirus and feline herpes virus (cat flu). The shortage was caused by one of the primary manufacturers taking significant numbers of compromised vaccinations out of circulation.

In Victoria, the shortage caused several local Councils to suspend the regulatory requirements for F3 vaccination for cats. This included allowing cats to be rehomed or fostered without a vaccination. Kittens that were six weeks old and over, were also prioritised for vaccination. In addition, some Local Councils suspended trapping for cats and kittens.

The LDH believes that the DAFF should play a leadership and coordination role through the Ministerial Council on Agriculture, to ensure the security of supply for vaccines and other essential preventative treatments for companion animals. Ensuring the ongoing security of supply of vaccines will reduce the risk of further shortages in the future.

National database and research hub for companion animal welfare

State and Territory Governments and shelters and pounds collect data on companion animal welfare including admissions, surrenders, adoptions and rehoming and desexing. There is also significant research being undertaken in companion animal welfare through universities and animal welfare organisations.

The LDH believes that the Animal Welfare Division of the DAFF should establish a centralised national database and research hub for companion animal welfare which can share information across jurisdictions. A national database and research hub will allow for sharing of information and research on companion animal welfare.

Standards and Implementation – Consistent legislation and regulation across jurisdictions

Across the States and Territories, there is inconsistent legislation and regulation for companion animals. This means there is a lack of national best practice that prioritises companion animal welfare.

This includes a national agreed definition for companion animal welfare and consistent regulation. Examples of inconsistent regulation include the stray hold period for cats and the quarantine period for animals held in shelters and pounds.

The current stray hold period in Victoria is eight days and is significantly longer than other States. This means that limited action can be undertaken for each animal that comes to a shelter or pound.

The Victorian quarantine period for cats and dogs is also significantly longer than states and territories (which also have variations). A shorter quarantine period reduces the level of anxiety and improves the health and wellbeing of cats and dogs can experience living in the quarantine environment. Dogs in particular, experience stress and anxiety from limited exercise socialisation and enrichment opportunities (Raudies, Waibinger and Arhant, 2021). A shorter quarantine period can also improve rehoming outcomes.

The LDH believes that the DAFF should work through the Ministerial Council on Agriculture to develop consistent legislation and regulation for companion animal welfare across jurisdictions.

Research and development on semi-owned and unowned cats

There is a national animal welfare crisis in semi-owned and unowned cats, with increasing numbers of stray cats and kittens being admitted to shelters and pounds across States and Territories.

In the last four years, the LDH has admitted 1,857 stray cats and 2,295 stray kittens (LDH Sheltermate, 2024). These cats and kittens are mostly not desexed and are abandoned or from cat colonies. They face significantly shorter lifespans than owned cats, with much higher rates of disease and illness.

The LDH believes that the research and development stream of the strategy should address the national crisis in semi-owned and unowned cat overpopulations including further research in areas such as cat containment, and Trap Neuter, Release (TNR) and Trap, Desex, Adopt or Return (TDARS). This is very different to, and should be kept separate from, any national approach to managing feral cat populations.

Summary of Recommendations

The LDH believes that the following issues should be addressed in the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy:

- Include a focus on the human animal bond and the five domains model in the vision, to demonstrate why it is important to value the welfare of companion animals and animals associated with agricultural and commercial industries.
- Develop a prevention workstream to change attitudes to companion animal ownership and improve animal welfare outcomes for companion animals.
- Appoint a Ministerial advisor for companion animal welfare. The advisor will work with State and Territory Governments, through the Ministerial Council on Agriculture, which reports to National Cabinet annually on workplans.
- Expand the role of the Animal Health Division of the DAFF to focus on companion animal welfare.
- Expand the role of the Office of Chief Veterinary Officer for Australia, to include companion animal welfare as part of its role on improving Australia's animal health status.
- Develop a leadership and coordination role through the Ministerial Council on Agriculture, to ensure the security of supply for vaccines and other essential preventative treatments for companion animals.
- Work through the Ministerial Council on Agriculture to develop consistent legislation and regulation for companion animal welfare across jurisdictions.
- Establish a centralised national database and research hub for companion animal welfare which can share information across jurisdictions.
- Address the national crisis in semi-owned and unowned cat overpopulations through the research and development stream of the strategy.

If you require further information about our submission, please contact our Advocacy and Policy Manager, Malcolm Roberts-Palmer at: Malcolm.Palmer@dogshome.com

Your sincerely



Jeremy Huntley, CFO and The Lost Dogs' Home Senior Executive, Responsible
In the absence of Grant Robb CEO