

26 August 2024

Kristie Glass
Animal Management Coordinator
City of Melbourne
Council House 2
240 Little Collins Street
Melbourne 3000



Dear Kristie,

Lost Dog's Home Submission City of Melbourne Cat Management Consultation

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the City of Melbourne Cat Management 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 believes that the focus on mandatory desexing and cat containment in the consultation, should be considered in partnership with other policies and programs that help to change attitudes to cat ownership and reduce the number of cats and kittens coming to shelters and pounds each year.

The LDH submission will consider the following issues:

- Incentives for cat owners to maintain ownership
- Providing information on cat ownership to CALD communities
- Containment and cat welfare
- Encouraging semi-owners of cats to become permanent owners

Incentives for cat owners to maintain ownership

Council pounds, shelters and other animal welfare organisations regularly see much higher admissions for cats and kittens than dogs and puppies. In 2022-23, the LDH admitted approximately 11,304 cats and kittens. This compares to 6,068 dogs and puppies (LDH Annual Report, 2022-23).

Cat owners are also less likely to actively seek to reclaim their cats. 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.

The cost of living crisis is impacting on cat owners' ability to maintain ownership. 35 per cent of respondents to the Victorian Pet Census identified ongoing financial costs as a significant drawback of owning a pet. (Victorian Pet Census, 2023). The total

average annual cost of a cat per household was \$2,134 in 2022-23 (Victorian Pet Census, 2024).

As outlined in its Domestic Animal Management Plan (DAMP) 2022-2025, the City of Melbourne currently offers incentives that support pet owners including:

- Desexing vouchers for pet owners on benefits or concession cards that offer a 33 per cent discount.
- Free first year registration for people purchasing an animal from an approved shelter.
- Ensuring pet shops and animal shelters have sufficient information to give to new pet owners about responsible pet ownership.

Other Victorian Councils offer similar incentives as part the implementation of their DAMPs. One of the most successful programs was Banyule City Council which ran from 2013-2021.

This program provided free desexing, microchipping and registration to cat owners. It also provided free transport for community members if they needed to take their cats to and from veterinary appointments (Cotterell et al, 2024).

The program initially targeted suburbs with high levels of social and economic disadvantage. It was then extended to all suburbs in the municipality (Cotterell et al, 2024).

Over the duration of the program, the City of Banyule had a 66 per cent decrease in the impoundment of cats, an 82 per cent decrease in euthanasia rates and a 36 per cent fall in cat related calls to Council. Surrender rates for owned cats and kittens also fell by 50 per cent in the last four years of the program (Cotterell et al, 2024).

The LDH believes that the City of Melbourne should consider building on its existing incentives to offer free desexing, microchipping and registration to cat owners from low income households and residents who need financial support in the cost of living crisis.

Providing information on cat ownership to CALD communities

The City of Melbourne has a highly diverse population. 55 per cent of the city's population were born overseas compared to 38 per cent for Greater Melbourne. The top three countries of birth include China (11.2 per cent). India (6.7 per cent) and Malaysia (4 per cent) (City of Melbourne id Community Profile, 2024).

The City of Melbourne DAMP recognises that diversity and inclusion is an important aspect of pet ownership. The DAMP states that it will investigate the need for information to be published in multi-lingual formats.

The LDH supports this objective and encourages the City of Melbourne to provide information that is culturally sensitive and takes accounts of different attitudes to cat ownership.

Providing this information will allow for a greater understanding of cat ownership and welfare in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities (CALD) communities and can assist with changing attitudes to cat ownership.

Containment and cat welfare

In Victoria, there is significant support for cat containment policies. The Victorian Pet Census states that 77 per cent of respondents (12,056) supported cat containment as an important part of responsible cat ownership (Victorian Government, 2023).

Cat containment can reduce the harm that domestic cats can cause to wildlife, particularly wildlife that use private gardens and local parks (RSPCA, 2018). It can also potentially reduce the incidence of domestic cats being lost and becoming strays.

Despite this, containment can have potential negative impacts on the welfare of cats. This includes cats contained indoors for extended periods without stimulation such as enrichment toys or human contact.

The LDH believes that if the City of Melbourne adopts a cat containment policy it should include an education program that highlights the importance of cat welfare including enrichment toys and human contact.

The City of Melbourne should also consider providing free or discounted cat enclosures to cat owners on low incomes, older residents and people with a disability. These groups are unlikely to be able to afford to buy or build their own cat enclosures.

Encouraging semi-owners of cats to become permanent owners

Shelters and pounds, and other animal welfare organisations are seeing a significant increase in the number of stray cats admitted throughout the year, as the cat breeding season is getting longer. In the last four years, the LDH has admitted 1,857 stray cats and 2,295 stray kittens (LDH Sheltermate, 2024).

Semi-owners can be reluctant to become full-time owners because they already own cats, may be on low incomes or living in insecure accommodation. This can make the cost of desexing, microchipping, vaccination and general veterinary care for a cat unaffordable (Crawford et al, 2023).

The Victorian Pet Census found that 15 per cent of respondents did not want a cat full time and 16 per cent were concerned about the cat's history. The census also found that 23 per cent cited financial reasons as a reason for not taking ownership of a cat (Victorian Pet Census, 2023).

The Banyule City Council program provided free desexing, microchipping and registration to semi-owners of cats, if they agreed to take full ownership of the cat. (Cotterell et al, 2024).

The LDH believes that City of Melbourne should use the same approach as the Banyule program for semi-owners of cats. This could help to reduce the numbers of stray cats and kittens going to pounds and shelters each year.

Summary of recommendations

The LDH believes that the focus on mandatory desexing and cat containment in the consultation, should be considered in partnership with other policies and programs that help to change attitudes to cat ownership. This includes the following:

- Offer free desexing, microchipping and registration to cat owners from low income households and residents who need support in the cost of living crisis.
- Provide information to CALD communities that is culturally sensitive and takes account of different attitudes to cat ownership.
- Develop an education program for any new cat containment policy that highlights the importance of cat welfare including enrichment toys and human contact.
- Consider providing free or discounted cat enclosures to low-income households, older residents and people with disability.
- Offer free desexing, microchipping, and registration to semi-owners of cats if they agree to take full ownership.

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Grant Robb'.

Grant Robb
CEO