

**Submission to
Engage Victoria
Cat Management Strategy
Consultation
April 2024**



Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Recommendations	2
Theme 1: Promoting cat welfare and responsible ownership	2
Theme 2: Increase cat desexing rates	2
Theme 3: Expand cat containment	3
Theme 4: Reduce the impacts of semi-owned and unowned cats	3
Theme 6: Improve collaboration and information sharing	4
Theme 7: Improve laws and processes	4
Detail:	5
Theme 1: Promoting cat welfare and responsible cat ownership	5
Theme 2: Increase cat desexing rates	7
Theme 3: Expand cat containment	8
Theme 4: Reduce the impacts of semi-owned and unowned cats	9
Theme 6: Improve collaboration and information sharing	12
Theme 7: Improve laws and processes	13
References	14

Introduction

The Lost Dogs' Home (the 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 partners with 16 Victorian Councils and other organisations concerned with animal welfare and protecting the bond we have with our pets, including RSPCA Victoria, Pets of the Homeless and Pet Medical Crisis.

The Lost Dogs' Home Strategic Plan 2024- 2026 states that the LDH will be: *A fierce advocate for animal welfare*. This includes being a strong voice for animals and improving outcomes for cats.

The Victorian Cat Management Strategy presents an opportunity to improve the welfare of owned, semi-owned and unowned cats and kittens living in Victoria.

This submission outlines recommendations for six of the seven themes outlined in the consultation paper, except for Theme 6, which focuses on managing feral cat populations. These themes relate to the LDH's role as an animal welfare organisation under the *Domestic Animals Act 1994*.

This submission considers the following to be vital for a cat management strategy to be successful:

- Changing peoples' attitudes towards cat ownership, and the behaviours of cat owners;
- Providing well thought through subsidies and incentives; and
- Having a robust and appropriate funding model in place.

Recommendations

Theme 1: Promoting cat welfare and responsible ownership

Action 1

Develop state-wide accessible, clear, and consistent information resources that all stakeholders can use. Resources should have simple messages on responsible cat ownership and cat containment that acknowledge the value cats bring as pets.

Recommendation

- Animal Welfare Victoria (AWV) should develop a comprehensive campaign to change attitudes to cat ownership. This should include funding for financial incentives that promote cat welfare including discounts to low-income households for desexing, registration, vaccination and veterinary services.

Action 2

Develop specific information resources for multicultural communities and encourage stakeholders to use existing multicultural engagement channels to reach different communities.

Recommendation

- AWV should develop information resources for CALD communities for the campaign on changing attitudes to cat ownership. This includes presenting information in different languages and taking account of cultural perceptions of cat ownership and welfare.

Theme 2: Increase cat desexing rates

Action 3

Support innovative desexing trials and training programs, such as high-volume clinics and pre-pubertal desexing initiatives.

Recommendation

- AWV should directly fund animal welfare organisations with the capability to do so, to be able to undertake high volume desexing drives.

Action 5

Invest in affordable desexing options, especially for low-income earners, including targeted grants to assist vulnerable Victorians in desexing their cats.

Recommendation

- AWV should make the Council desexing trial, which essentially provides the means to provide subsidies for low-income earners, permanent and significantly increase the funding.

Theme 3: Expand cat containment

Action 7

Enhance cat containment education and programs, including reviewing and simplifying enclosure guidelines and conducting research on the welfare of contained cats

Recommendations

- AWV should develop education programs on cat containment that are aimed at changing attitudes and emphasise the importance of cat welfare.
- AWV should provide funding to Councils with cat containment policies to subsidise the installation of cat enclosures for low-income households.
- AWV should properly evaluate existing Council cat containment policies to determine their efficacy and/or how such an approach might be improved or changed to protect cat welfare and support low-income households.

Theme 4: Reduce the impacts of semi-owned and unowned cats

Action 9

Provide ongoing education on the benefits of taking full responsibility for semi-owned cats

Recommendations

- AWV should fund Councils and animal welfare organisations to provide education and information programs that promote the benefits of taking on full responsibility and encourage semi-owners of cats to adopt.
- AWV should provide funding for financial incentives to encourage full ownership of semi-owned cats such as low-cost or free desexing, microchipping, vaccinations and initial veterinary checks.

Action 10

Consider implementing shorter holding periods for unidentified cats in shelters and pounds to expedite adoption

Recommendations

- AWV should implement a shorter hold period for unidentified cats in shelters and pounds. Most lost animals are reclaimed within 48 hours. A shorter hold period would speed up the adoption process for abandoned animals, with significant positive impacts on animal welfare and shelter capacity.

- AWV should commit to collaborating with animal welfare agencies and take responsibility to develop and execute a campaign that will effectively address community concerns and provide reassurance about shorter hold periods and reclaiming their lost animals. Promoting the importance of registration and microchipping.

Theme 6: Improve collaboration and information sharing

Action 18

Establish a working group with key stakeholders to drive and monitor Strategy implementation.

Recommendation

- AWV Establish a taskforce or similar, to oversee delivery against the strategy. A taskforce would be responsible for managing implementation, measurement of success against KPIs and report back to the community on progress.

Action 19

Share cat management data on centralised platforms

Recommendations

- AWV should establish a comprehensive online platform with high level functionality that facilitates the sharing of cat management data across animal welfare organisations and councils in formats that support progress in developing cat management initiatives.
- The Victorian Government should extend current reporting requirement to other service providers including rescue groups, CFCNs and other rehoming organisations.

Theme 7: Improve laws and processes

Recommendations

- AMW should provide larger grants funding for desexing initiatives for Councils and animal welfare organisations for more targeted and greater impact.
- AMW should provide direct funding to animal welfare organisations for cat and kitten desexing.

Detail:

Theme 1: Promoting cat welfare and responsible cat ownership

Action 1

Develop state-wide accessible, clear, and consistent information resources that all stakeholders can use. Resources should have simple messages on responsible cat ownership and cat containment that acknowledge the value cats bring as pets.

Background

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 5,881 cats and 3,864 kittens. This compares to 2,946 dogs and 186 puppies (LDH, Sheltermate, 2024).

There are also high numbers of cats that are not reclaimed. 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.

Quantitative and qualitative data from the LDH would suggest, return to owner rates are much lower for cats than dogs for two main reasons:

1. Fewer numbers of cats are registered and/or microchipped, or the microchip details are out of date
2. Cat owners are less likely to actively seek to reclaim their cats, believing they will come home of their own accord.

Banyule City Council ran an incentives-based campaign promoting cat welfare across eight years between 2013 and 2021.

It provided free desexing, microchipping and registration to cat owners and semi-owners, if they took on full ownership responsibilities. 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, there was 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 supports the development of programs that aim to provide incentives to change attitudes to cat ownership. These programs should emphasise the Human Animal Bond and incorporate Five Domains Model to highlight the importance of owners maintaining the physical and mental health of cats (Mellor, 2017).

This should include providing financial incentives for cat welfare including discounts for low-income households for desexing, registration, vaccination and veterinary services. 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).

Recommendation

- AWW should develop a comprehensive campaign to change attitudes to cat ownership. This should include funding for financial incentives that promote cat welfare including discounts to low-income households for desexing, registration, vaccination and veterinary services.

Action 2

Develop specific information resources for multicultural communities and encourage stakeholders to use existing multicultural engagement channels to reach different communities.

Background

Tailoring information on cat ownership to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities (CALD) communities can greatly assist with changing attitudes to cat ownership.

There is significant cultural diversity across Victoria. For example, in Greater Melbourne, over 1.3 million people speak a language other than English. This is reflected in many of the LDH's partner Councils. For example, 18.5 per cent of Brimbank's population speak Vietnamese and 14 per cent of the City of Melbourne population speak Mandarin.

Recommendation

- AWW should develop information resources for CALD communities for the campaign on changing attitudes to cat ownership. This includes presenting information in different languages and taking account of cultural perceptions of cat ownership and welfare.

Theme 2: Increase cat desexing rates

Action 3

Support innovative desexing trials and training programs, such as high-volume clinics and pre-pubertal desexing initiatives.

Background

All animals that come to the LDH are desexed prior to rehoming. The LDH often run high volume desexing clinics that aim to encourage owners to desex their cats and kittens and to increase rehoming rates.

Grants for these kinds of activities are competitive and usually of relatively low value, spread across many organisations, effectively a scattergun approach. Future funding initiatives should be more targeted to funding comprehensive multi-year desexing initiatives for greater impact.

Recommendation

- AWV should directly fund animal welfare organisations, to a level that is relevant to the numbers of animals sheltered, to undertake high volume desexing as part of rehoming for cats and kittens as well as cat owners who may otherwise not have their cats desexed.

Action 5

Invest in affordable desexing options, especially for low-income earners, including targeted grants to assist vulnerable Victorians in desexing their cats.

Background

Desexing cats and kittens is a key component of changing attitudes towards their welfare. Desexing can significantly reduce the risk of unwanted breeding, aggressive behaviours and health risks such as infections or certain types of cancer.

In March 2024, AWV launched a \$300,000 trial program to increase cat desexing rates. Local Councils can apply for grants of up to \$25,000 to deliver free and low-cost desexing to target areas with problem cat populations or support Victorians who may be experiencing financial hardship. The program aims to increase cat desexing rates, reduce impoundment and euthanasia rates and improve cat welfare and council registration rates.

Recommendation

- AWV should make the Council desexing trial permanent and significantly increase the funding to be able to achieve the level of impact required to make a difference.

Theme 3: Expand cat containment

Action 7

Enhance cat containment education and programs, including reviewing and simplifying enclosure guidelines and conducting research on the welfare of contained cats

Background

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

However, containment can also 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.

To date, there has been little focus on the welfare of cats subject to containment in Victorian Government policies or Councils Domestic Animal Management Plans.

31 per cent of Greater Melbourne households pay more than 30 per cent of their income in rent, compared to 32 per cent for regional Victoria (id community profile, 2023).

Low-income households, people with a disability and older residents are also unlikely to be able afford to build their own cat enclosures and therefore may have surrender their cats to avoid risking fines for breaching containment requirements.

Low-income households also represent a higher proportion of semi-owners of cats. Cat containment can also deter semi-owners of cats from becoming permanent owners, as they may not be able to afford it.

In addition, there has been no evaluation of existing cat containment policies to determine their effectiveness and impact on cat welfare. This includes tracking and reporting on the effectiveness of the containment policies.

Recommendations

- AWV should develop education programs on cat containment that are aimed at changing attitudes and emphasise the importance of cat welfare.
- AWV should provide funding to Councils with existing cat containment policies to subsidise the installation of cat enclosures for low-income households.
- AWV should properly evaluate existing Council cat containment policies to determine their efficacy and/or how such an approach might be improved or changed to protect cat welfare and support low-income households.

Theme 4: Reduce the impacts of semi-owned and unowned cats

Action 9

Provide ongoing education on the benefits of taking full responsibility for semi-owned cats

Background

The LDH strongly supports providing ongoing education on the benefits of taking full responsibility for semi-owned cats.

Often semi-owners are reluctant to become full-time owners. 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 (Victorian Pet Census, 2023).

Combined with an increase in the length of the cat breeding season, this is leading to shelters and pounds seeing an increase in number of stray cats admitted throughout the year.

In the last four years, the LDH has admitted 1,857 stray cats and 2,295 stray kittens (LDH Sheltermate, 2024). Without significant investment in education programs for semi-owners, these numbers will continue to increase.

The LDH believes that education programs need to be combined with financial incentives to encourage semi-owners to adopt.

Cat semi-ownership is more common with owners who already have cats, are on low income and are renting in low-income communities, where the cost of desexing, microchipping, vaccination and general veterinary care for a cat is often unaffordable (Crawford et al, 2023).

The Victorian Pet Census also found that 23 per cent cited financial reasons as a reason for not taking ownership. The total average annual cost of a cat per household was \$2,134 in 2022-23 (Victorian Pet Census, 2024).

Recommendations

- AWV should fund Councils and animal welfare organisations to provide education programs that promote the benefits of taking on full ownership and encourage semi-owners of cats to adopt.
- AWV should provide funding for financial incentives to encourage full ownership of semi-owned cats such as low-cost or free desexing, microchipping, vaccinations and initial vet checks.

Action 10

Consider implementing shorter holding periods for unidentified cats in shelters and pounds to expedite adoption

Background

Stray Hold Period

Most reclaimed animals are within 24-48 hours of arriving at the LDH (The LDH, 2023).

The current stray hold period of eight days for cats and kittens, means that limited action can be undertaken for each animal that comes to a shelter or pound. A shorter hold period will allow veterinary and behaviour care to be started much earlier, speeding up adoption pathways for abandoned animals and greatly improving animal welfare outcomes.

Eight-day quarantine period

In shelters and pounds, the quarantine period for cats and kittens can often significantly extend the length of time before an abandoned animal can enter its adoption pathway.

Section 2.4 of the Code of Practice for the Management of Dogs and Cats in Shelters and Pounds (the Code of Practice) requires all dogs and cats to be quarantined for eight days prior to rehoming (AWV, 2023).

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.

Recommendations

- AWV should implement a shorter hold period for unidentified cats in shelters and pounds. Most lost animals are reclaimed within 48 hours. A shorter hold period would speed up the adoption process for abandoned animals, with significant positive impacts on animal welfare and shelter capacity.
- AWV should commit to collaborating with animal welfare agencies and take responsibility to develop and execute a campaign that will effectively address community concerns and provide reassurance about shorter hold periods and reclaiming their lost animals.

Action 12

Promote targeted Capture, Desex, Adopt programs in 'hot spots' with high unowned and semi-owned cat populations and need.

Background

In Australia, there has been limited studies on these types of programs with Emeritus Professor Jackie Rand from the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation, undertaking a comprehensive study of the viability of Trap Neuter Release (TNR) in Queensland (Tan, Rand and Morton 2017).

TNR is currently illegal in Victoria, because it breaches legislative requirements for the abandonment and seizure of stray cats under the *Domestic Animals Act 1994* and the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986*.

Some international TNR programs were successful when the removal of kittens and adoption of adults was included, which is known as trap, desex adopt or return (TDARS) (RSPCA, 2018).

In Victoria, no studies have been undertaken and there is no available information on where the hot spots are for unowned and semi-owned cat populations.

Recommendations

- AWV should undertake mapping of areas with high levels of unowned semi-owned cat populations.
- AWV should fund comprehensive TDARS studies to determine if it is appropriate for managing unowned and semi-owned cats in Victoria.

Theme 6: Improve collaboration and information sharing

Action 18

Establish a working group with key stakeholders to drive and monitor Strategy implementation.

Background

The Victorian Domestic Cat Management Working Group, which is chaired by AWW, has had the strategy as a key area of focus. It has also considered other related issues such as cat vaccines. Reframing this working group to focus on the cat management strategy, will provide the basis for managing the implementation of the strategy.

Recommendation

- AWW should establish a taskforce or similar, to oversee delivery against the strategy. A taskforce would be responsible for managing implementation, measurement of success against KPIs and report back to the community on progress.

Action 19

Share cat management data on centralised platforms

Background

The AWW published the Mandatory Reporting of Animal Welfare Outcomes for Shelters and Pounds, on its existing website in December 2023 and has committed to do so every six months (AWW, 2023).

This should be transferred to a purpose-built web portal that can also share fate data from CFCNs and rescue groups as well as much richer data including shelter and pound desexing, microchipping and vaccination data, and information on low-income households and homeless clients of shelters and pounds and CFCNs and rescue groups.

It should also have a level of functionality that enables the data to be used efficiently and effectively to improve animal outcomes and welfare.

In addition, the Victorian Government should extend reporting requirements to other types of service providers including rescue groups, Community Foster Care Networks (CFCNs) and other rehoming organisations. This will allow for the sharing of information and data across the whole rehoming sector.

Recommendations

- AWW should establish a comprehensive online platform with high level functionality that facilitates the sharing of cat management data across animal welfare organisations and councils in formats that support progress in developing cat management initiatives.

- The Victorian Government should extend current reporting requirement to other service providers including rescue groups, CFCNs and other rehoming organisations.

Theme 7: Improve laws and processes

Action 22

Review the cat management framework to identify further options for reform including funding models

Background

The current funding model for animal welfare, provides grants that are open to government non-government and community organisation across Victoria.

This makes it difficult for animal welfare organisations and Councils to undertake long term planning to consistently address cat welfare issues, such as desexing. The grants are often small and there is significant competition across different sectors.

The LDH also does not receive any direct government funding and relies on being successful during grant rounds to provide for vital and essential equipment and key programs, such as desexing.

Recommendations

- AMW should provide larger grants funding for desexing initiatives for Councils and animal welfare organisations for more targeted and greater impact.
- AMW should provide direct funding to animal welfare organisations for cat and kitten desexing.

References

Animal Welfare Victoria, The Code of Practice for the Management of Dogs and Cats in Shelters, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (2023).

Animal Welfare Victoria, (2023), Victorian Pet Census, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

Animal Welfare Victoria (2024) Mandatory reporting of animal welfare outcomes in shelters and pounds, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

Brimbank City Council, Domestic Animal Management Plan 2021-2025 (2021).

Chua, D, Rand J & Morton J, (2023) Stray and Owner Relinquished Cats in Australia – Estimation of Numbers Entering Municipal Pounds, Shelters and Rescue Groups and Their Outcomes, *Animals* 13, MDPI, Switzerland.

Crawford, C (et al), (2023) Solutions-Based Approach to Urban Cat Management-Case Studies of a One Welfare Approach to Urban Cat Management, *Animals*, Vol 13, 3423, MDPI, Switzerland.

Cotterel J, Rand J, Barnes T & Scotney R (2024) Impacts of a Local Government Funded Free Cat Sterilization Program for Owned and Semi-Owned Cats, MDPI, Switzerland.

Mellor, D (2017) Operational Details of the Five Domains Model, *Animals*, Vol 7, MDPI, Switzerland.

Tan, K, Rand, J and Morton, J, (2017). Trap Neuter-Return Activities in Urban Stray Cat Colonies in Australia, *Animals* 7, 46, MDPI, Switzerland.

The Lost Dogs' Home Sheltermate (2024) Cats and Kitten Admissions 2021,2022 and 2023.

Victorian State Government, Taskforce for Rehoming Pets, Final report to the Victorian Government (December 2021).