

Pets in Strata Review

The Cat Protection Society of NSW operates a relatively small shelter for cats; we take in up to 1,000 cats and kittens every year. Most of them are strays but many are much-loved family pets, and many of them are surrendered because their people can't keep them due to pet-unfriendly housing. It is a constant issue and something like 20 per cent of owner-surrendered cats come to us because of pet-unfriendly housing, though we believe the number is under-reported due to people's feelings of guilt or shame. We see firsthand the tears of the people (including their children, for whom such an event is terribly traumatic) and we see also the distress of their cat.

Our shelter manages intake so that we don't euthanase cats due to space constraints but that isn't true for a huge number of pounds and shelters. Across Australia every year tens of thousands of healthy cats and dogs are being put to death because there aren't homes for them. There are people who'd love to have a pet but who can't; there are people who would love to keep their pet but can't.

The consequent death toll isn't just an animal welfare issue, it's an ethical issue and it's a human health issue – for the relinquishing owners; for the pound and shelter workers; and for the vet nurses and vets who are expected to perform the task of killing healthy cats and dogs. There is a cost, and it's paid highly by many.

We need to consider pets and housing in a One Welfare context: good animal welfare is also good human welfare.

Cat Protection recommends the review consider the AHURI peer-reviewed report released in February of this year, ***Housing and housing assistance pathways with companion animals: risks, costs, benefits and opportunities.***

<https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/350>

The research into the human-animal bond has grown enormously, especially over the past 20 years and it reveals many benefits, as well as challenges – such as people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness choosing pet over place.

“my cats were my babies ... family ... Would you give up your children?” and “I probably could have got a place but I couldn't not have the dog.”

These quotes are from a research paper ***The Unbreakable Bond: The Mental Health Benefits and Challenges of Pet Ownership for People Experiencing Homelessness***, led by the University of Tasmania's Professor Michelle Cleary, and supported by Cat Protection. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33196324/>

The report ***Animals and People Experiencing Domestic and Family Violence*** released in November 2020 by Domestic Violence NSW highlights the urgent need for pet-friendly rental (much of which would be strata) to support people leaving domestic violence. Numerous studies have shown that people experiencing domestic and family violence will frequently choose to stay in that situation for fear of what might happen to their pets if they leave without them (the links between domestic and interpersonal violence and cruelty to animals

have been well-established over years of peer-reviewed research). A lack of pet-friendly accommodation can have the worst possible outcomes.

<https://www.dvnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Nov-DVNSW-Report-on-Animals-and-People-Experiencing-Domestic-and-Family-Violence.pdf>

People don't see their pets as 'property' – they are family. And they are incredibly important to people, in so many ways. Whether pets are much loved by happy, healthy people, or by people facing challenging circumstances or health issues, their centrality in their people's lives is without question. It is harsh and cruel to expect their owners to simply give them up.

As an animal welfare organisation, naturally our goal is good animal welfare, but cats are *companion animals* – they are the companions of people, so the welfare of their people matters enormously, to them and to us. Cat Protection has long been advocating for a more pet-friendly society (which includes housing) and we have been pleased to see several improvements over the past few years. We've assisted our clients with strategies like pet resumes and pet agreements to help them secure accommodation that allows them to keep their pets. We've observed that many new developments, and landlords, have recognised that responsible pet-owners make great long-term, reliable tenants.

The key is that when an animal's welfare needs are met, when they have a good and healthy life, that is when the animal is least likely to have a negative impact on anyone else. If housing, in all its forms, is provided in a One Welfare framework, then pets and people will both be better off.

As we have noted in past submissions, harm to property and neighbours can come from many sources and the issue for communal living is to have in place mechanisms to deal with these. Banning pets is not an answer to solving the complexities of people's impact on one another but it is most certainly harmful to people who love their pets and to people who seek the companionship of a pet. Cat Protection agrees with the proposed Option 2, that by-laws cannot unreasonably prohibit the keeping of pets.

We would also suggest consideration be given to an expert panel who could assist in dispute resolution and who could draft overarching best-practice guidelines on the keeping of pets in strata (not by-laws, but guidelines to assist strata communities make informed policies). Many decisions about pet-keeping in apartments are made without reference to veterinary science ('size' of dog rather than breed and temperament being a typical example; or 'one cat only' where a pair of bonded cats might have no greater impact on neighbours). In our experience, 'pet' problems that have been identified in strata frequently relate to behavioural issues, which can frequently be resolved if the owner seeks and follows professional advice. Pet abandonment can be a concern also, so it is vital that pet owners in strata provide the owners corporation with details of who to contact in the event of an emergency. This example is another illustration that considering potential issues in a One Welfare framework can both resolve the concerns of people and promote better animal welfare.

Cat Protection thanks you for the opportunity to make a submission and would be happy to provide any further information.

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