

**Provide your feedback below**

<b>Your Details</b>	
<b>Question</b>	<b>Response</b>
I would like my name and personal details to be treated as confidential:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, please keep my details confidential <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I consent to my details being shared
Name	<b>Kristina Vesk</b>
Name of Organisation (if applicable)	<b>The Cat Protection Society of NSW</b>
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**Your Details**

Which of the following best describes you?

- Council Metro
- Council Metro- fringe
- Council Regional
- Council Rural
- County council
- Joint Organisation/Regional Organisation of Councils
- Pet owner
- Breeder
- Industry / advocacy organisation
- Member of the public
- Veterinarian
- Authorised identifier
- Rehoming organisation / rescue group
- NSW State Government agency
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**1. Strategic framework for encouraging responsible ownership of companion animals (see Part 1 of the Discussion Paper for background information)**

**Question**

**Response**

<p><b>Do you support the CA Act being amended to focus more on encouraging responsible pet ownership outcomes over strict compliance processes?</b></p>	<p>Yes. Legislation cannot control the behaviour of cats and dogs; it can only provide a legal framework for people’s responsibilities.</p> <p>The legislative framework should provide for a One Welfare approach to supporting healthy, safe and peaceful communities for people (whether they are pet owners or not) as well as animals (pets and wildlife) and the built and natural landscape.</p> <p>A One Welfare approach will look different in different communities because it will necessarily address local needs and concerns. Councils need to be able to deliver services and support that are relevant and effective at hyper-local levels.</p> <p>Arguably councils already have the capacity to offer companion animals services in a more holistic way, but most councils choose to take an enforcement approach. This is perhaps because, although the principal object of the CA Act is ‘to provide for the effective and responsible care and management of companion animals’ it is largely focused on procedures and penalties (registration, impounding) and not on animal welfare. Council companion animal management officers are largely tasked with compliance. This conflicts with what people might think council companion animal welfare teams should do; that is, to be focused on standards for the health, safety and wellbeing of the animals and the community.</p> <p>There remain vast differences between councils’ interpretations of the Companion Animals Act and between their practices in companion animal management.</p> <p>As Cat Protection noted in our submission to the inquiry on cat population management, there seems to be a cultural/historical problem where many councils put ‘pets’ into ranger and compliance services (and sometimes even “waste management”) and their focus is on compliance to such a degree that companion animal staff don’t have the time and aren’t given the authority to do much else. This is a loss, because companion animal officers are typically committed to animal welfare and do their best within the constraints on them.</p> <p>If councils want to positively engage with their communities about animals, they need to bolster their companion animal teams and elevate their role in delivering positive support and services to their communities. Councils also need to approach companion animal management in a One Welfare context. While changing the CA Act won’t change what resources councils choose to</p>
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**1. Strategic framework for encouraging responsible ownership of companion animals (see Part 1 of the Discussion Paper for background information)**

	apply to supporting healthy, safe companion animals and communities, it could drive cultural change for the better.
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**How can responsible pet ownership education be used to manage menacing or dangerous dogs?**

**How could the legislation be improved to motivate better dog owner behaviour and encourage owners to manage their dogs more responsibly? (For example, what does responsible dog control in public look like?)**

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**How could the legislation be improved to motivate better cat owner behaviour and encourage owners to manage their cats more responsibly? (For example, cat containment)**

Mandatory cat containment is neither necessary nor socially equitable in most urban and suburban areas. For our views and recommendations on this question, please refer to Cat Protection’s submission (attached) and our other evidence presented to the NSW Legislative Council Animal Welfare Committee’s inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales, as well as the submissions presented to that inquiry, and to this review, by the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF).

Most cat owners already contain their cats either all the time or most of the time. However, we know that there are significant populations of homeless cats and the most practical, effective, economical and compassionate way to address that issue is with no-cost or very low-cost desexing. We refer also to the CIE Report on Rehoming of Companion Animals in NSW prepared for the NSW Office of Local Government in 2022.

There is enormous demand for affordable desexing. Our charity offers discounted desexing programs for owned cats as well as a very successful Adopt-a-Stray program. Adopt-a-Stray gives people the opportunity to take in a stray cat and have them desexed, vaccinated, microchipped and registered for only \$100. Obviously, this is only made possible by the generosity of our supporters whose donations and bequests provide the very heavy subsidies for the program.

However, even \$100 is unaffordable for many people, particularly people who are investing their own time and money to desex and rehome multiple stray cats in their neighbourhoods. Thanks to the NSW Government grant of \$1.5m to Cat Protection for the DIVA Cats program, we’ve been able to provide cat desexing (and microchipping, registration and vaccination) for \$10 with a cap of \$20 in total for multiple cats. This has been mainly targeted at LGAs in high need. It’s enormously important to provide early-age desexing as a female cat can have her first litter by around 6 months of age. If people have to wait to save up money for desexing, it means more kittens are born.

The DIVA Cats program finishes at the end of June and we’re unable to take more bookings as we’ve already desexed more than 3,000 cats and there are several hundred more booked into the program. The demand is enormous and has revealed to us just how many individuals and small groups – with no support from their local councils – have sought to address the issues of feline homelessness in their areas. Without their incredible efforts there would be more growth in feline homelessness.

**1. Strategic framework for encouraging responsible ownership of companion animals (see Part 1 of the Discussion Paper for background information)**

In our consultations with clients of the DIVA Cats program, they identified costs of desexing and registration as barriers to better management of feline populations; a lack of targeted education and support for cat owners; deliberate breeding (whether for profit, eg backyard breeders of ‘ragdolls’, or for cruelty, eg to use in dogfighting). They want more free or very low-cost desexing services; a useful microchip program (rather than the current registration system); micro-targeted education and support for different groups and via multiple channels; support for high-volume welfare and desexing veterinary services; development of community centres; and for councils to do more to assist with managing homeless cat populations by providing paid, trained animal care workers in the field to assist with trapping and desexing, and working with carers and rescue groups – cooperatively and compassionately, not by killing and impounding. The experiences and insights of our DIVA clients shows that a One Welfare approach is vital; what they confront in trying to assist cats isn’t only “cats” but complex social and economic issues.

<p><b>Are there other matters that should be considered?</b></p>	<p>Councils should be required to collect and report meaningful data (if they refuse to log calls about ‘stray cats’ how do they know where there might be problems? If they refuse to take cats into their pound service, how are their data on cats in pounds at all meaningful?). Non-council animal shelters should also contribute to data to start building a more accurate picture of companion animals in NSW.</p> <p>Registration requirements are a barrier to the humane management of homeless cat populations.</p> <p>Ongoing consultation with communities and the veterinary and animal welfare sector, such as the Responsible Pet Ownership Reference Group, and council companion animal advisory committees, are beneficial to sharing information and developing policies and practical strategies to improving health, safety and welfare for people and animals.</p>
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**2. Compliance and enforcement role of councils (see Part 2 of the Discussion Paper for background information)**

Question	Response
<p><b>What changes to NSW laws, regulations, codes or guidelines could be provided to councils and other enforcement authorities to better support responsible pet ownership?</b></p>	<p>Please refer to our (attached) submission to the NSW Legislative Council inquiry into pounds in New South Wales; submission to the inquiry into the management of cat populations; and the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage. Please also refer to the submission of the APWF.</p>
<p><b>How could NSW laws, regulations, codes or guidelines be improved to support councils to better manage dangerous and restricted dogs?</b></p>	
<p><b>Are the current enforcement provisions under the Act (including penalties for offences - see Appendix B of the discussion paper) appropriate? If not, what enforcement provisions should be changed?</b></p>	<p>The current system inappropriately imposes actual or potential penalties on people seeking to assist cat welfare by desexing and rehoming. Please refer to submissions as noted above.</p>
<p><b>Are there other compliance and enforcement matters that should be considered?</b></p>	<p>There need to be links between the CA Act and POCTAA and human health and welfare services. Poor physical and mental health issues in people can impact on animal welfare; likewise, poor animal welfare can impact on human mental and physical health. A One Welfare framework acknowledges these links and provides an holistic approach to protect the health, safety and welfare of people, animals and the environment.</p>

**3. Companion animal population and rehoming (see Part 3 of the Discussion Paper for background information)**

Question	Response
<b>What more could be done to reduce stray and homeless cats and dogs in NSW?</b>	Please refer to submissions as noted above.
<b>What changes can be made to NSW laws, regulations, codes or guidelines to reduce the number of companion animals entering the pound and rehoming system in the first place?</b>	The cost-of-living and housing crises are major contributors to the current high levels of pet surrender and abandonment, as well as reducing demand for adoptions. This must be tackled on the ‘supply’ side (eg no-cost or very low-cost desexing; prohibiting the sale of undesexed kittens) as well as the ‘demand’ side (affordable and pet-friendly housing, including crisis accommodation and support for pet-owning victims of domestic and family violence). Councils must take positive animal welfare strategies, such as returning lost animals to their people without penalty and providing practical assistance to residents to foster responsible companion animal ownership. Strategies to support community cat care programs to manage feline population growth and to improve health and welfare need to be developed and resourced. Early-age desexing of cats is critical to managing feline population growth.
<b>For companion animals needing to enter the ‘pound’ system, what could be done to increase rehoming?</b>	Refer above and to other submissions previously cited.
<b>Are there other dog and cat population and rehoming matters that should be considered?</b>	Refer to submissions previously cited.

Please send your completed submission form, via:

- Mail to C/- Office of Local Government, Locked Bag 3015, Nowra, NSW 2541; or
- Email to: [ca.review@olg.nsw.gov.au](mailto:ca.review@olg.nsw.gov.au)
- Online via: <https://www.olg.nsw.gov.au/councils/policy-and-legislation/acts-and-regulations/companion-animals-act-review>

Review of the NSW Companion Animals Laws – Submission on the Discussion Paper



**Submission  
No 93**

**INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS  
IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Organisation:** Cat Protection Society of NSW

**Date Received:** 6 December 2024

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## **Submission from the Cat Protection Society of NSW**

### **NSW Legislative Council Animal Welfare Committee Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission.

The Cat Protection Society of NSW cares about cats and the people who love them. We've been assisting street cats to find loving homes since 1958 and have always advocated for practices and policies that would improve the lives of cats, people, and the natural environment.

We were the first shelter in NSW to practice early-age desexing and rehome only desexed kittens and cats. Early-age desexing (EAD) (before 16 weeks) is critical to population management. We invested in education videos on EAD which are available at no charge for veterinarians at [Cat Care](#)

We have a range of videos and written information for the general public on the benefits of EAD, including translated factsheets and videos in [community languages](#).

We launched the Good Neighbour Project in 2016, and this includes a suite of resources to help cat owners keep their cats safe and protect wildlife [Good Neighbour Project](#).

As well as rehoming cats through our physical shelter, we offer adoptions through our program [Adopt-a-Stray](#) which provides desexing, vaccination, microchipping and registration, plus information and support from our feline health and welfare team, for only \$100. This supports people who've found and are feeding a stray cat to take all the necessary steps for the cat's health and to formally welcome the cat into their home, at an affordable price. In 2023-24, we found homes for 515 cats and kittens via our shelter, and 1,281 cats and kittens via Adopt-a-Stray.

We know that cost is a barrier to desexing ([Ipsos Cat Welfare Survey 2023](#)). In addition to Adopt-a-Stray, we also offer discounted desexing programs and vaccination referrals for cat owners. In 2023-24 we assisted 2,173 cats with desexing and 621 cats with F3 vaccinations under these programs.

In 2023, we received a grant of \$1.5m from the NSW Government to deliver a two-year, targeted cat desexing program, which we've called DIVA Cats (Desexing, Identification and Vaccination Assistance for Cats). To the end of September 2024, 1,844 cats and kittens had been desexed under the DIVA Cats program, which we offer in addition to the services described above. We are an authorised registration agent and in 2023-24, we lifetime registered 2,782 cats in our programs (taking the burden of registration off councils).

Cat Protection adopts a One Health/One Welfare framework. Ideally, One Health/One Welfare should be the approach in all policy development.

In considering the management of cat populations, it is essential to take a One Health/One Welfare approach because cats cannot be isolated as a separate entity; their lives are entwined with people, other animals and the environment around them. This means that

there can be no generic approach to the 'management' of cats because they live in a multitude of different circumstances and environments.

As a starting point, any policies need agreed definitions. Cat Protection supports the definitions of cats as given in the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation's submission (which have been adapted from the definitions in RSPCA Australia's report Identifying Best Practice Domestic Cat Management in Australia).

Secondly, but equally important, any policies need to recognise that habitats are highly specific, and situations are unique. Justifications for controls must be based on real, not perceived harms. Climate change and habitat loss are the major threats to Australian flora and fauna (and people), yet these threats are subsumed by moral panic around cats. Time and energy that could be applied to truly local research and strategy development that offers a humane and ethical approach is instead wasted on a binary argument that promotes alienation and distrust rather than building collaboration and engagement.

WIRES makes the point in their submission to this inquiry that "Welfare-based approaches benefit local communities, including those who care about and for wildlife – who are often the same people ..." and Cat Protection finds the same: people concerned with the wellbeing of cats are typically concerned with the wellbeing of *all* animals.

Most local councils do little or nothing in relation to cats, arguing they have no power, and that they can do nothing until laws are changed. In fact, they do have scope to do a lot; they choose not to and seek to give themselves a free pass by saying they're calling for regulatory change. "Slacktivism" comes to mind.

We acknowledge there are councils, particularly rural and remote, who cover vast geographic areas and with extremely limited resources. We appreciate that their capacity is minimal, if indeed they have any at all. As noted earlier, areas and situations are diverse, and each is unique. We also acknowledge that there are some councils who make a genuine effort, and who work with their communities and non-government organisations to improve the lives of cats, people and the environment. Unfortunately, they are in the minority and tend to depend on individual champions within council, either elected or staff.

It is telling that when Cat Protection launched the Good Neighbour Project and we sent brochures and information to all councils and offered further support (at no cost to councils) we received only a handful of responses. Local Government NSW calls for "awareness and education campaigns" on responsible cat ownership, but few councils bother to even provide links from their websites to the wealth of resources freely available on the websites of Cat Protection and the RSPCA. In fact, most council websites don't even feature "pets" as a subject on their home page, and when the pets section is found, it is usually focused on compliance issues.

One has to ask, if there already exist excellent resources on "responsible pet ownership" available free of charge to councils, why aren't they promoting them? Adding links to a website is hardly a drain on their resources and it is disappointing that good quality, practical and freely available information on cat care and welfare isn't included on every council's website.

Most councils promote the facilities they have for dogs, such as off-leash parks. These are good venues for providing information about cats, because multi-pet households are common; our Ipsos research showed about 40% of cat owners also own a dog. Council newsletters, libraries and community centres, not just council pounds or one-off pet days, are channels available to councils that can be used to promote positive cat care resources such as the Good Neighbour Project and the RSPCA's Keeping Cats Safe at Home.

There seems to be a cultural/historical problem where many councils put 'pets' into ranger and compliance services (and sometimes even "waste management") and their focus is on compliance to such a degree that companion animal staff don't have the time and aren't given the authority to do much else. This is a loss, because companion animal officers are typically committed to animal welfare and do their best within the constraints on them. To be clear, our references to 'councils' are not about companion animal staff.

If councils want to positively engage with their communities about animals, they need to bolster their companion animal teams and elevate their role in delivering services to their communities. Don't treat them as tick-a-box compliance officers and do start listening to them. We have experienced support from companion animal staff for initiatives that would help cats and cat owners, but those staff haven't the authority (and aren't given permission) to pursue them. This is doubtless as frustrating and demoralising for them as it is for us.

It would be reasonable for councils to argue for more funding to support companion animal teams who could work positively with the community, animal welfare and conservation groups to develop local initiatives that support people, pets and the environment. However, arguing for mandatory cat containment is simply asking to be funded for policing their constituents for compliance with a rule that is socially unjust and not scientifically valid.

Mandated cat containment will cause more harm than good, to cats and to people. All council staff would be doing is compliance monitoring, at great financial expense, and with the added costs of moral injury to their staff and the community, including cat owners, carers, pounds, shelters, and veterinarians.

The reasons cat containment won't work are examined in detail and with evidence in the submission of the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation. Cat Protection supports (including financially) the Foundation's vital, groundbreaking research on community cats. It is the first comprehensive research of its kind in Australia, and it is providing an evidence-base for policy. We don't wish to waste the Committee's time by re-stating the submission of the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation; we agree with their contention that cat containment won't work, that we need to take a One Welfare approach, and that high intensity cat desexing initiatives and community cat programs have the capacity to genuinely make a positive difference to managing cat populations.

We note the excellent points made in many submissions, including those from WIRES, the Australian Veterinary Association, and NSW RSPCA.

Rather than reiterate these (solidly referenced) arguments, we would like to highlight that there exists, now, a capacity for councils and the NSW Government to build and deliver better outcomes for people, pets and the environment.

Over the past couple of years, there's been a great deal of work done investigating animal welfare policies and practices – including detailed and thoughtful reports produced by recent inquiries of Legislative Council committees, notably on pounds in NSW, and the veterinary workforce shortage; and the draft CIE report on Rehoming of Companion Animals prepared for the Office of Local Government.

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation publishes updates on its [Community Cat Program News](#) which also highlights research that has been published in peer reviewed journals. Cat Protection has commissioned Ipsos to research cat welfare in NSW, with the 2023 report comparing findings with previous surveys.

This body of work is rich with information to guide policy development; the inquiry into pounds [Report](#) provide an excellent starting point, which recommends among other things, funding for large scale targeted desexing programs, review of the need for community cats to be registered to an individual, clarifying the legal status of TNR programs, and enhancing and standardising pound data.

Current pound data reported is limited in its usefulness, particularly in relation to cats. According to the annual pound information published on the OLG website [Pound and Dog Attack Statistics - Office of Local Government NSW](#), in 2023-24 a grand total of three cats were received by Inner West Council; likewise, Liverpool City Council received three cats. These numbers are meaningless.

We know that many councils don't even record calls about cats, claiming that they have no capacity to do anything about wandering cats, so they don't need to record or report such calls because they aren't actionable.

As a part of the DIVA program, Cat Protection sought information from councils to assist us to target areas of need. We created a data sheet for those councils to collect cat-related inquiry data if they were unable to make changes to their existing CRM systems. None has implemented the data collection sheet or incorporated data capture into existing systems. In the absence of inquiry data (and in the case of councils who refuse to accept stray cats, an absence of pound admission data), what do councils know about cats? Do they prefer to *not know* about cats?

For our programs we've relied on word-of-mouth and the local knowledge and experience of the tireless community cat carers who fill the void left by their councils. We are doing what we can to map areas of need and develop useful data.

To reduce populations of homeless cats it is obvious they must be desexed but, as noted by the inquiry into pounds, the need for registration presents a barrier. We have sought for this to be removed, even just as an exemption for the DIVA Cats program, but this has not been granted. There are cats whose carers would have had them desexed under the DIVA program were it not for this barrier.

A year ago, I gave evidence to the pound inquiry, noting that we welcomed the grant from the NSW Government for DIVA, but that our capacity to deliver it was severely hampered by both the veterinary workforce shortage and the incapacity to desex cats unless they would be registered to an individual person. If we could register the cats to the program it would assist with monitoring and measuring impact, and desex more cats.

A year ago, I said the law demands that cats be allowed to breed; that councils won't take them in; and that most councils don't even record data about cats. A year later, nothing has changed, including the reproductive capacity of cats. An undesexed female might have had three litters in this time.

Ignoring the issue won't make it go away; it makes the problem worse. To the degree that feline population growth has been contained, DIVA has surely helped, and we can thank charities like ours (most of our work is funded by donations and bequests), independent (unfunded) cat carers and rescues, veterinarians who do surgeries at a financial loss to themselves, and members of the community who adopt stray cats. To some extent, we can thank some councils.

It's beyond distressing that we have at hand the means to do something about feline population growth, and action as simple as waiving the need for registration would make a

huge and positive impact. Instead, community cat carers who invest their own time and money risk or incur penalties for simply trying to improve animal welfare.

Most cat owners in NSW already desex their cats (90%) and keep them indoors-only (42%) or with contained outdoor access (9%) and a further 25% are curfewed indoors overnight ([Ipsos Cat Welfare Survey 2023](#)).

Making confinement mandatory is socially unjust and will have negative impacts on feline welfare and human welfare and will not achieve the outcomes desired. With effort, using evidence-based practices and working collaboratively, there exists now a capacity to improve feline welfare and environmental protection. That capacity would benefit from useful data; from increased funding – not only to councils (and not for policing their residents) but also to conservation groups, animal welfare organisations, and community services (which include the soon-to-be defunded Community Justice Centres). Community-based human services play a strategic role in a One Welfare approach to managing cat populations. Waiving the registration requirement (or allowing cats to be registered to a program) and financial support for intensive desexing programs will have an immediate impact.

To offer some optimistic news, we'd like to share some of the feedback from our DIVA Cats clients, who've reported positive outcomes for cats and indeed for themselves:

- “Since the DIVA program has entered my life and all those cats I’ve rescued / rehomed / kept it’s been so much less stressful, less emotional and of course less financial strain ... I hope this program keeps going as there are so many that still need our help.”
- “We have had success in stopping the explosion of cats which had grown from 4 to 40 in a matter of a year.”
- “In the short period of time when I began using this amazing program there has definitely been an improvement in the area I’ve been focusing on. I’m not feeling depressed and overwhelmed knowing you’re supporting me to get this area under control. I truly can’t explain how run down, discouraged and frustrated I was ...having them desexed and chipped has helped me confidently home cats ... I’ve definitely seen less kittens in these areas ...”
- “CPS really has helped in so many ways, I don’t know if you all realise but some of us can’t stop doing what we do, seeing them suffering causes pain in our hearts and minds which affects our daily lives ... thank you for your support, patience and dedication helping these sweethearts get healthy and hopefully as much as possible homes”
- “... the DIVA program has literally saved their [the cats’] lives and our sanity ... your program has prevented the birth of 30-40 kittens from this one small group. When those numbers are expanded to encompass just Sydney west, it is a terrifying statistic with suffering on an unimaginable scale. The kindness and compassion shown by your staff, along with the practical advice has been of immense emotional support to us and the financial assistance has meant we could actually achieve the desexing, rehoming and stabilising of this group.”
- “We’ve had 9 cats benefit from your program ... glad to say no more breeding is happening.”
- “About 20 cats seemed to think my place was safe for them and their little ones ...Being on a pension I really could not afford [to look after them] ... I had paid for some to be desexed at a cost of \$120 each but I could not afford to keep doing this ... Your program saved these animals and my sanity ... I think your program is much needed and super successful.”

DIVA Cats has highlighted to us the incredibly valuable role played by individuals and small/informal rescues, at their own expense and in their own time, in helping to manage feline welfare in the community. Cat Protection takes this opportunity to sincerely thank them for their outstanding efforts.

We thank the NSW Government for the grant that allowed us to develop the DIVA Cats program. We hope that we will find means to fund it beyond the grant period, and that cats do not have to be registered to be desexed. And we thank all our supporters who help us to assist thousands of cats, and the people who love them, every year.

Thank you to the Committee for your time and consideration.

Kristina Vesk OAM  
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6 December 2024

**Submission  
No 126**

## **INQUIRY INTO POUNDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Organisation:** Cat Protection Society of NSW

**Date Received:** 25 August 2023

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**NSW Legislative Council  
Portfolio Committee No. 8 – Customer Service  
Inquiry into pounds in New South Wales**

**Submission from the Cat Protection Society of NSW**

Cat Protection advocates for animal welfare to be considered in a One Health/One Welfare framework, and this applies to pounds and related services, including local government companion animal management, shelters, rescue groups and veterinary services.

Even in an ideal world, there will be a need for pound services because animals become lost, people face situations where relinquishment for rehoming is their only option, and additionally in the real world, puppy farmers breed for profit without concern for consequence and people with little regard for animal welfare dump pet animals.

The legal framework cannot regulate the animals, it can only seek to regulate the behaviour and actions of people. When it was introduced in 1998, the Companion Animals Bill represented a significant regulatory and cultural shift in the way cats and dogs were perceived and 'managed'. The Bill was vastly improved by the many amendments introduced by members in each House, and over the years there have been many amendments to both the Act and supporting regulations.

It is helpful to look back on those debates in Parliament a generation ago: some of the issues raised 25 years ago remain contentious (eg cats being allowed to roam), some have evolved to reflect changed community attitudes which have elevated the status of non-human animals, recognising they have intrinsic value. The popularity of television vet/pet programs and public education initiatives showing the benefits of positive-reinforcement behaviour management strategies and environmental enrichment for cats and dogs have positively influenced the way people look after their pets. We can also observe some real improvements such as declining euthanasia rates of dogs in pounds, increased foster care programs and the engagement of shelters and rescue in the overall effort to promote companion animal health, safety, and wellbeing.

Some matters that were mooted never came to pass. In the second reading speech to the Legislative Council, the Attorney General stated that: "A major project will be to transfer the provisions for council pounds, presently covered by the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Animal Trades) Regulation, into the Companion Animals Act. At this time all aspects of the operations of council pounds, whether run directly by local council or under contract by an animal welfare organisation or veterinarian, will be reviewed in relation to procedures, holding periods, standards of care, public access, adoption rate for animals, and the like." (Hansard, Legislative Council, 1 July 1998, p6853).

Technology has improved and microchipping is no longer novel but there is still no regulation pertaining to the standard for microchips used. Like the legislation, the Companion Animal Register that was new in 1998 has been renovated and updated over the years, but it is aged infrastructure.

There are still no standards and guidelines for pounds and shelters. Although there have been reviews commenced by the NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI) only the code of practice for boarding cats and dogs is in place as a proxy. It is inadequate. Cat Protection has sought to fill that gap with free information on shelter health which we developed with the generous input of Vanessa Barrs, Professor of Feline Medicine and Infectious Diseases <https://catcare.org.au/shelter-health/> and with free information sessions with pound and shelter staff. Although we are a relatively small shelter, we employ best-practice feline sheltering, constantly learning and adapting, and sharing our knowledge and experience.

There remain vast differences between councils' interpretations of the Companion Animals Act and between their practices in companion animal management. This has particularly been the case with assisting lost and stray cats and has meant not only residents in affected areas being underserved and veterinary clinics being overwhelmed, but decades of inadequate and skewed data. A council pound that refuses to accept cats can boast a 'nil' euthanasia rate purely on the basis that you cannot kill an animal that is not there. The data gap is compounded by the lack of definition clarity on pound data (particularly in relation to cats) and the non-collection of data from shelters and authorised rescue groups.

Over recent years, there have been reviews of animal welfare regulation, including the proposed animal welfare law to replace the outdated Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. These reviews led by DPI frequently included broad consultation and sometimes sector-only consultation. Previous Ministers for Local Government established the Companion Animals Taskforce and later, the Responsible Pet Ownership Reference Group. These advisory bodies comprised companion animal experts and practitioners and were chaired by MPs with a great commitment to companion animal welfare, two of whom were practising veterinarians. The work of these bodies was significant. Additionally, in 2022 the NSW Office of Local Government (OLG) engaged the Centre for International Economics (CIE) to review, consult and report on rehoming of companion animals in NSW <https://www.olg.nsw.gov.au/councils/responsible-pet-ownership/rehoming-practices-review/>

To put it bluntly, over the past many years, the sector has given significant time and effort to contribute to these reviews and processes. While there was a recent and very welcome investment by government in companion animal welfare, the reform process was delayed and then stalled. There is, however, a wealth of recent information and opinion available to government to guide a fresh attempt at updating the regulatory framework for companion animal welfare in NSW. The existing framework is outdated, difficult to navigate and does not promote a One Welfare best-practice approach.

Cat Protection would be pleased to assist the Committee's inquiry into pounds, but we submit that the current overarching legislation (auspiced by OLG and DPI) mitigates against finding the best way forward to protect animal health and welfare, to positively support pet owners, and to promote community health, safety and amenity, and environmental protection.

### **Resourcing challenges, including the adequacy of funding given towards the operation of pounds by local and state governments**

As noted above, there is wide variability between councils/Local Government Areas (LGAs) in terms of effort, expenditure, services, and demand. There are also vast differences in access to support services, such as veterinarians, as noted in submissions to the inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage. Challenges are different in rural, regional, remote, and metropolitan LGAs, and socio-economic demographics vary between and within LGAs.

Given some 69% of households own pets and others plan to acquire a pet, <https://animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au/report/pets-in-australia-a-national-survey-of-pets->

[and-people-2/](https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/housing-mobility-and-conditions/latest-release) and given housing mobility in Australia <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/housing-mobility-and-conditions/latest-release> it seems illogical to tie funding for companion animal income and expenditure to LGAs. It also seems inefficient to expend so much costly administration in registration for relatively small returns. Reduced fees and then free registration for pets from pounds and shelters has been very welcome and an excellent incentive for adoptions but, putting aside the importance of councils monitoring dangerous dogs, what is the cost-benefit of registration fees as they are currently structured? Is it fair that LGAs with the most socio-economic disadvantage experience the highest levels of demand for pound services? (Refer to CIE Report summary "Pattern of cats and dogs entering and leaving pounds" page 3). Why is there so much effort to apply a user-pays principle to pet ownership which confers community-wide benefits, including substantial health and economic benefits?

There is a lack of funding and a lack of appreciation of the One Welfare benefits to local communities of providing integrated animal services (not just pound services, but active supportive interventions including discounted/free desexing, vaccination, microchipping and registration, social support for vulnerable pet owners [including overwhelmed pet owners] and appropriate action on hoarding).

### **The adequacy of pound buildings and facilities**

Many are outdated or non-existent. In the absence of standards for pounds, quality varies considerably.

Facilities that are not built with infectious disease management and shelter health and well-being strategies in the design/upgrade stage risk creating broad risks to public and animal health. For example, porous materials that cannot be effectively cleaned create a reservoir for viruses, including parvovirus, and zoonoses such as ringworm, among other diseases. New animals can contract disease from the environment and then infect other animals. Without strict standards applying to facilities, and especially since many pounds do not vaccinate on entry, and because all animals entering pounds experience stress, the risk of disease transmission remains high.

Many facilities still have cats and dogs in close proximity, which is stressful to both species. They should not be able to see, hear or smell each other.

### **Welfare challenges facing animals in pounds, including the provision of housing, bedding, feeding, exercise, enrichment, veterinary treatment, vaccination and desexing**

Unless an animal enters a pound with a current valid vaccination certificate, they should be vaccinated on entry. They should also be treated for parasites and be health checked by a veterinarian or a qualified, experienced veterinary nurse. Funding must be adequate to provide housing that promotes shelter health (as noted earlier, Cat Protection has produced guidelines on our [catcare.org.au](http://catcare.org.au) website but there are also many other freely available sources of information). We commend the Fear Free Shelters program to reduce stress on animals in pounds and shelters <https://fearfreeshelters.com/>

The principle of capacity to care is vital to animal welfare (and the health and wellbeing of the animals' carers). Any pound or shelter operating beyond its capacity is doing a disservice to the animals, their human carers, and the community.

Managing capacity to care means managing admissions, which requires a One Welfare approach, working with the community, and dealing with the legislative lacuna which leaves community cats undesexed.

## **The adequacy of laws, regulations and codes governing pounds, including the Companion Animals Act (1998) and Animal Welfare Code of Practice – Dogs and cats in animal boarding establishments (1996)**

As earlier noted, these are outdated, inadequate or absent and there is a need for a comprehensive rethink and redrafting (or first drafting) to bring the regulatory framework into line with contemporary science, evidence-based best-practice and community standards, and to ensure that it works to best serve the needs of companion animals, people, and the environment. This includes seeking to prevent moral injury to people, the consistent collection of quality data (from shelters and rescue groups as well as pounds and councils) and it needs to be supported by adequate investment so that good animal welfare is not confined only to wealthy LGAs.

### **Factors influencing the number of animals ending up in pounds and strategies to reduce those number**

Most cats going into pounds are “stray” (in LGAs where stray cats are accepted). Cat Protection is aware that the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) is making a submission to the Inquiry, and refers the Committee to their submission, as well as the CIE Report mentioned earlier.

A particular and pressing current issue relates to housing insecurity and pet-unfriendly rental accommodation, combined with cost-of-living pressures. This means that more people are struggling and while many people will make extreme sacrifices to keep their pets (including choosing homelessness over pet relinquishment) understandably many people do not. The recent NCOSS report highlights the financial stress that so many are experiencing.

<https://www.ncoss.org.au/policy-advocacy/policy-research-publications/barely-hanging-on-the-cost-of-living-crisis-in-nsw/>

Combined with the increased number of pets acquired in the lockdown period of the Covid-19 pandemic, this has created a perfect storm for pet relinquishment. We make the observation here, based on experience and anecdotal evidence from pounds, that many people feel great distress and shame at having to surrender a beloved family pet, and adopt strategies to conceal the relinquishment (such as having a third party take the animal in as ‘lost’ and then not being contactable to reclaim them). We urge all providers of human services to recognise the human-animal bond and to support their clients to keep their pets where that is possible.

Cat Protection maintains our opposition to puppy farms as cruel, unnecessary, and contributing to overpopulation of pets. Any cats adopted or sold should always be desexed (as well as vaccinated and microchipped and registered) prior to transfer to a new owner. Dogs might need to be desexed at a later age but should at least be vaccinated, microchipped and registered.

### **Euthanasia rates and practices, including the adequacy of reporting euthanasia rates and other statistics**

We have already noted the paucity and inconsistency (in practice and interpretation) in data collection. The CIE Report also covers this issue. It is impossible to make good use of such poor data. As also previously noted, data must also be collected from other parties such as shelters and rescue groups.

We again refer the Committee to the submission of the APWF and the CIE Report, in particular, in relation to cats being presented to pounds with a likely outcome of being killed when they might otherwise live good lives, desexed, and with community care.

Euthanasia practice must be regulated, ethical and humane, noting this can be a particular challenge in regional and remote LGAs without access to veterinary services, and any LGA experiencing shortages in veterinary services. This issue deserves examination by the Veterinary Practitioners Board, Australian Veterinary Association and the Australian Institute of Animal Management (largely representing rangers) and other relevant stakeholders to find a way forward for humanely and ethically dealing with euthanasia of animals where that is warranted. Animals should never be euthanased in front of other animals, and euthanasia should not be considered as a convenience but where it is in the best interests of the animal. Euthanasia decisions should always be made on a case-by-case basis and not subject to a tick-a-box exercise.

### **The role and challenges of behavioural assessments**

There are many validated methods for behavioural assessment of dogs and cats, but these depend on the staff administering them being properly and consistently trained in the use of those tools and, vitally, the situation of the animal being assessed. Every animal will be stressed, to a greater or lesser degree, but stressed, on arrival at a pound or shelter. They have been subjected to removal from their normal environment, likely experienced a stressful trip to the service, they may have untreated health issues and they are almost certainly traumatised by the strange new surroundings and unfamiliar smells, sounds and sights. It is highly inappropriate to imagine a test of temperament is fair to the animal at this point and even an animal who reacts with docility in that frightening circumstance might actually be a feisty animal when they are settled.

Behavioural assessments cannot be done on entry if they are to have any value, and they cannot be done using outdated cruel methods (such as poking at animals to see whether they react). They should be based in Fear Free principles, undertaken only by trained and qualified staff, and contextualise the background of the animal.

On entry, apart from essential veterinary health care, the focus must be on helping the animal to feel secure, safe, free from harm from people and other animals, and all the interventions must be focused on assisting the animal to settle and providing them with reassurance but also space to retreat. This means their total environment matters, beyond their holding apartment.

Cat Protection's annual reports detail how we treat the cats in our care, from admission to adoption <https://catprotection.org.au/annual-report/>

We provide individualised care and focus equally on hygiene and physical health as we do on the mental health and behaviour of our cats and kittens. These feed into each other, for better or worse, and there is no point having a perfectly hygienic sterile facility which is super-stressful because the animals' immune systems will be compromised and this will put them at high risk of getting sick – as well as being distressed and suffering poor welfare.

### **Relationship between pounds and animal rescue organisations**

Positive and constructive relationships that assist animal welfare – and especially to deal with the peaks of kitten season – are vital. While it might seem difficult or even unfair to impose obligations on volunteer groups or charities, it is important for community confidence and for animal welfare that any groups working with pounds to help with fostering or

rehoming meet minimum standards, operate only within capacity, keep accurate records, and report on outcomes. An updated Pet Registry could assist to facilitate some of this.

Again, we refer to the CIE Report and the APWF submission in relation to the matter of caring for cats who are formally unowned (but often very much loved).

### **Challenges associated with the number of homeless cats for pounds and animal rescue organisations, and strategies to address these**

As above, we refer the Committee to the submission of the APWF and the CIE Report. The situation for cats remains challenging as the majority of cats entering pounds are not legally owned (that is, they are not microchipped and registered) and the outcome for cats is poor, though has somewhat improved over recent years. Essentially though, a cat entering a pound is more likely to be killed than find a home.

### **Strategies for improving the treatment, care and outcomes for animals in pounds**

Strategies need to include improved funding, an improved legislative framework and improved capacity to support pet owners keep their pets, so they do not end up in pounds. This includes a focus on return-to-owner and recognition of the importance of pets to people by social service providers (including domestic violence refuges, hospitals, mental health facilities, supported accommodation, foodbanks, etc). Strategies also need to consider the demand-side, to allow people who want pets to adopt, for example, through more pet-friendly rental regulations and practices.

Access to affordable desexing is imperative. While the majority of owned cats are desexed (consistently around 90%) (refer to Ipsos reports commissioned by Cat Protection <https://catcare.org.au/cats-in-the-community/>) there are also consistently owners who plan to desex their cats but have delayed the surgery due to cost. Because cats reach sexual maturity at a young age and can be pregnant with kittens while still kittens themselves, closing that gap is imperative <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-020-79513-6>

### **Any other related matter**

In our submission to the shortage of veterinary services, we noted that the dearth of pound and companion animal services from councils unreasonably and heavily shifts the burden of lost, stray and homeless cats and dogs onto private veterinary clinics. They are left with the moral hazard of what to do; they are not paid to provide any services (except in the cases of those few clinics who have formal agreements with councils to provide pound services). This issue has been raised by vets with councils for many years. Animal welfare charities such as Cat Protection make a significant impact on reducing the incidence of feline homelessness, but the entirety of animal welfare cannot be left to charities alone, nor can vets be expected to fill the gaps with unpaid work.

Cat Protection would also like to refer the Committee to the research and advocacy pages of our website which include materials relevant to this Inquiry.

<https://catprotection.org.au/research/> <https://catprotection.org.au/advocate-for-cats/>

We are grateful for the Committee's consideration and time.

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Submission  
No 181

## INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

**Organisation:** Cat Protection Society of NSW

**Date Received:** 21 July 2023

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**NSW Legislative Council  
Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Regional NSW  
Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales**

**Submission from the Cat Protection Society of NSW**

Investment in veterinary health is an investment in human health. The interrelationship between human and non-human animal and environmental health cannot be overstated.

The Covid-19 pandemic clearly illustrated the urgency with which the world needs adopt a One Health/One Welfare framework. The current outbreaks of H5N1 avian influenza have devastated wild birds and domestic poultry and with cases in some mammals (including cats and dogs) there is concern the virus might pose a risk to people or lead to the emergence of new viruses

<https://www.who.int/news/item/12-07-2023-ongoing-avian-influenza-outbreaks-in-animals-pose-risk-to-humans>

Veterinarians are essential health workers and the shortage in the veterinary workforce is a public health issue.

**Shortage across the profession**

Cat Protection does not directly employ veterinarians, but we work with a network of private veterinary practices, in greater Sydney as well as our regional partners in Bathurst, Lithgow, and Narrabri. In the recent past, two of our partner regional clinics have closed due to the veterinary shortage, and several of our Sydney partners have closed their books to new clients. One of our most hardworking and supportive clinics in western Sydney now has a waiting list of longer than 8 weeks. Others have placed restrictions (such as time/day, procedures) and all tell us that they are stretched beyond capacity.

Kookaburra Veterinary Employment has noted on its website that “of the current 735 open vet vacancies, 131 have been continuously advertised for more than 8 months ... As of 30<sup>th</sup> April 2023, 52 clinics had been advertising continuously for longer than 2 years without filling their vacancy.” The table accompanying the article shows the average number of weeks jobs are advertised rising from 8 in 2014 to 15 in 2020 to 25 weeks in 2023. Vet nurse job listings have also risen. <http://www.vetsuppliersdirectory.com.au/blog-kookaburra-veterinary-employment/>

Workforce shortages are not unique to Australia. Data from the United States shows an already serious shortage of veterinarians which has become more critical since the pandemic, with a Mars Veterinary Health study estimating the US will be short 15,000 companion animal veterinarians by 2030. This estimate did not account for the increase in companion animal ownership nor working-age vets leaving the profession due to burnout and stress (which will be compounded by the pressures of workforce shortages). <https://www.marsveterinary.com/tackling-the-veterinary-professional-shortage/>

## Challenges in maintaining a sustainable workforce

The tuition costs for veterinary degrees are extremely high (c\$100,000) and most vets will not earn commensurately high incomes, leaving them saddled with many years of student debt, and an extremely restricted capacity to save to buy a home or their own practice.

Moreover, the study load is intense (and research has shown DVM students report higher psychological distress than medical students <https://doi.org/10.1111/avj.12845> ) which leaves little time for paid work during the six to seven years of the degree/s. Even for those who might have a part-time job, this becomes impossible in their final year when they are out on placements (which are an additional expense in the qualification). The constraint to paid work during study reduces the capacity to start building superannuation, which has lifetime financial consequences.

Cat Protection has a deliberate strategy of employing pre-DVM and DVM students as casual staff, providing them with invaluable experience (and income) but it is not a 'convenient' strategy for us as their needs for time off the roster are frequent. However, we regard this employment strategy (along with supporting student placements) as serving a purpose beyond our own needs.

The wealth requirements to undertake a DVM are a major barrier to diversity and equity. For those who financially struggle to complete the DVM, the struggle continues after graduation. It is unsurprising that many will choose to leave veterinary practice for a less stressful, better paid role. While pay is an issue, significant pay increases in private practice would simply shift the burden of financial stress from one vet to another vet (their employer) as consumer willingness and capacity to pay are limited.

As a starting point, universities must offer more and significant scholarships to improve diversity, equity and inclusion, and the Commonwealth government should do more to subsidise veterinary medicine degrees; they should also provide generous financial incentives (through HECS-HELP) for graduate veterinarians to work in underserved areas, particularly rural, remote, and regional communities.

The services of qualified veterinarians are essential to public health and safety, so it is incumbent on governments to ensure a sustainable veterinary workforce. Zoonoses, antimicrobial resistance, food safety, biosecurity hazards and emerging pathogens are challenges that require preventative, strategic, and coordinated responses. It is not adequate to simply hope that enough people will choose years of forgone income (and the attendant superannuation) and burdensome debt in order to study veterinary science when graduation is followed by (mainly) low to middle incomes and work that is stressful and ethically challenging.

The cooperation to combat health risks at the animal-human-ecosystems interface in the context of One Health between the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the World Organisation for Animal Health, the World Health Organisation and the United Nations Environment Programme, is recognition of the critical role of veterinary medicine in human public health. [https://www.who.int/news/item/29-04-2022-quadripartite-memorandum-of-understanding-\(mou\)-signed-for-a-new-era-of-one-health-collaboration](https://www.who.int/news/item/29-04-2022-quadripartite-memorandum-of-understanding-(mou)-signed-for-a-new-era-of-one-health-collaboration)

This recognition needs to be supported by urgent action. Unlike other health workers, there are few opportunities for government employment for veterinarians, leaving this component of public health vulnerable to market forces alone.

All small businesses face challenges, including increasing costs (rent, materials, labour, insurance, utilities) and regulatory requirements; for the veterinary sector there are additional compliance costs and hurdles, from zoning restrictions to registration and hospital licences, record management and medication storage and so on. Some of these costs can be scaled through corporatisation but that has the consequence, in need of profit for shareholders, of cherry-picking profitable service areas while underserved communities are neglected. Supporting vets in private practice will require support and resources to assist generic small business capacity as well as the particularities of veterinary business.

In addition to managing health risks, the veterinary workforce plays a vital role in supporting the positive health and economic benefits of companion animals, working and assistance animals. There is now a wealth of information on the benefits of pet ownership and studies of the human-animal bond continue to reveal the advantages arising from the unique attachment of people to companion animals.

A recent study prepared for The Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) conservatively estimated “total annual health care cost savings in the US related to pet ownership is now at least \$22.7 billion per year” and that “the evidence of pet ownership health benefits is increasing”. <https://habri.org/pressroom/20230523>

### **The burn-out and mental health challenges facing the veterinary profession**

In addition to the abovementioned financial issues (which are in themselves stressors) veterinary teams face challenges that are specific to the animal care sector. The workforce shortage is compounding the stress, which becomes a vicious cycle as more will leave the workforce due to stress.

A scoping study published in the *Irish Veterinary Journal* (Pohl et al) identified working hours and ethical dilemmas as major sources of stress.

<https://irishvetjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13620-022-00220-x>

Research into ethically challenging situations (Quain et al), which can lead to moral stress and distress, showed these increased significantly (from several times a month, to several times a week) with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fvets.2021.647108/full>

Veterinary team members working in companion animal practice were 3.2 times more likely to experience ethically challenging situations than those working in non-clinical roles

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fvets.2021.752388/full>

In the *Journal of Internal General Medicine*, Rosen et al explain that “Moral injury occurs when individuals violate or witness violations of deeply held values and beliefs. We argue that a continuum exists between moral distress, moral injury, and burnout. Distinguishing these experiences highlights opportunities for intervention and moral repair, and may thwart progression to burnout.” While this relates to human health clinicians, the parallels are clear.

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11606-022-07761-5>

Veterinarians are faced with duties of care to their patients (animals) and obligations to their clients (people). Those interests do not always align; people might not wish to pay for necessary procedures, or they might insist on futile treatment that is antithetical to the welfare of the animal. People might not *have* the money to pay for procedures. Clients can have unrealistic expectations, including of costs, given most Australians have little understanding of the true costs of medicine thanks to Medicare and the PBS. Clients’ unfiltered emotional responses can build up to vicious online campaigns and some clients engage in real life bullying and threats. Demand for service can exceed supply, causing delays, overwork, and stress.

It has been widely reported that the suicide rate among veterinarians is twice as high as that in other health disciplines and four times higher than the general population <https://www.monash.edu/medicine/news/latest/2020-articles/monash-university-report-identifies-occupations-with-greater-risk-of-suicide>

The tragic suicide of 33-year-old veterinarian Sophie Putland in 2021 led to her family and friends establishing Sophie's Legacy, which in May this year launched a campaign, "We're Only Human", to encourage pet owners to be kind and respectful, and to understand the pressures on veterinary staff. <https://www.sophieslegacy.com/>

Cat Protection has always sought to educate pet owners about the true costs of veterinary medicine and the value of establishing a strong and positive relationship with their local vet clinic. We value our vet partners highly and are constantly grateful for their generous support of our work. We do not take that support for granted.

Our model of service is to pay vets in private practice for the veterinary care of our cats and kittens, and costs of referred patients under our welfare programs. In the past year we paid over \$900,000 to vets in private practice. Our capacity to pay for complicated surgeries contributes to increased knowledge and skills (because we have funded what might be rare surgeries) and has on occasion alleviated the financial burden on vets who have responded in times of crisis to pets whose owners would never have been able to afford the care (for example during the 2019-20 bushfires). Arguably these cases also relieved some moral injury. Our model of service supports the regional communities we work in, because we are working with their local vet practices.

### **Role and challenges affecting veterinary nurses**

Achieving vet nurse qualifications is not cheap (about \$30,000) and as with veterinarians, generally vet nurses will earn a low-to-middle income. We support efforts to introduce formal recognition and registration of veterinary nurses, with defined scope of practice and title protection (See Australasian Veterinary Boards Council statement at <https://avbc.asn.au/latest-news/working-together-to-progress-regulation-and-title-protection-for-veterinary-nurses-and-veterinary-technicians/>)

Veterinary nurses, much like practice owners, are frequently required to have proficiency in both clinical and administrative skills, as well as marketing and communications. Small practice teams must multi-skill as they haven't enough staff to specialise. A possible solution is a model of contracted-in specialist veterinary practice administration shared between practices. Vet nursing is a physically demanding role and there is scope to investigate career paths for experienced nurses no longer fit for the physical demands of the role rather than losing them from the veterinary workforce. It would be worth investigating the development of a nationally accredited qualification in veterinary practice administration (there are qualifications for human health services administration).

### **Challenges facing the veterinary profession in regional, rural and remote NSW and strategies to support**

As earlier noted, there is a need for scholarships to improve diversity and equity, and financial incentives for graduate veterinarians to work in underserved areas such as regional, rural, and remote communities in NSW. Government-employed veterinarians (eg biosecurity and animal welfare) could supplement vets in private practice and in particular to meet the demands of after-hours and emergency services.

Further investment is necessary to support established veterinarians in these communities: they are struggling to maintain services. The enormous demands of clinical practice can

impact on administration – if you are one vet serving a vast area, how do you tell your client you can't respond to their emergency because you're doing paperwork? And when vets keep responding to clinical demands, the administration keeps building up, creating more stress and potentially compromising compliance. Innovations in remote working (as in, work from anywhere) must be explored to identify new means of supporting capacity for rural and remote veterinarians. As suggested earlier, there is scope to develop models of contracted-in, specialist veterinary administration, and technology can be used to provide that administrative support remotely.

### **Vets and lost, stray, homeless companion animals; wildlife; and emergency situations**

Cat Protection notes Portfolio Committee No 8 – Customer Service, is inquiring into pounds in NSW. The dearth of pound and companion animal services from councils unreasonably and heavily shifts the burden of lost, stray and homeless cats and dogs onto private veterinary clinics. They are left with the moral hazard of what to do; they are not paid to provide any services (except in the cases of those few clinics who have formal agreements with councils to provide pound services). This issue has been raised by vets with councils for many years. Combined with expectations that veterinarians will provide free care to injured wildlife, it is a significant contributor to moral stress of veterinary teams and imposes a further financial impost on practices.

Funding and strategies need to be made available for each of these categories: all councils should provide adequate pound services and develop animal welfare strategies. Animal welfare charities such as Cat Protection make a significant impact on reducing the incidence of feline homelessness, and we have taken in many cats and kittens 'dumped' at vet clinics, but the entirety of animal welfare cannot be left to charities alone, nor can vets be expected to fill the gaps with unpaid work.

Wildlife protection and care is a whole-of-community responsibility, but currently the burden falls disproportionately on wildlife charities and veterinarians. This is an area requiring discrete and proper consideration, strategy, and funding.

In emergency situations (bushfires, floods) responders are also often residents. During the extreme weather events over the past few years, we have witnessed firefighters saving homes while their own homes burned down, SES volunteers evacuating locals rather than staying home to protect their own properties. Less visible in the news, but just the same, we have seen vets working to protect and save affected animals, at personal and financial cost.

Emergency services now recognise the importance of including animals in preparing for and responding to emergencies <https://www.ses.nsw.gov.au/get-ready-animals/> but we need more coordinated work after the emergency has passed. After the 2019-20 bushfires, Cat Protection supported some veterinarians by paying costs of treating injured cats and paying for boarding of pet cats whose people had lost their homes, but again, events of this scale cannot only be supported by animal charities and private veterinarians.

### **Impact of the veterinary shortage on animal welfare, including the impact on the economy, members of the public, pounds, shelters, animal agribusiness**

The risks to public health and safety, biosecurity and food safety have been noted earlier. Animal health and welfare is at risk without access to preventative and necessary veterinary care. The AVA submission on the discussion paper of the role and functions of an Australian Centre for Disease Control highlights the importance of veterinarians in a coordinated One Health strategy.

<https://www.ava.com.au/member-updates/submissions/ava-submission-on-the-australian-cdc/>

The One Health High Level Expert Panel paper “Prevention of zoonotic spillover” notes the economic benefits of prevention (and acknowledges the ‘prevention paradox’ – that allocating resources to prevent something from happening is politically difficult as the value of prevention is considered ‘invisible’).

<https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/prevention-of-zoonotic-spillover>

Achieving a One Health approach to protecting public and animal health depends on a healthy and sustainable veterinary workforce.

Cat Protection can speak from first-hand experience as to the impact on shelters and members of the public as we are experiencing waiting lists for referral services and closure of clinics to new clients. Our own regular vets are struggling to keep up with demand, confronted not just with a shortage in the veterinary workforce but an increased number of patients due to the pandemic pet boom.

**Any delay in desexing cats has profound welfare consequences as kittens as young as 14 weeks can be pregnant; two months is the gestation period for a feline, so the potential for a feline population explosion is now high.**

The ABC reported on a cat owner in South Australia being advised of a five month wait for a desexing appointment <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-07/vet-shortage-delays-mandatory-desexing-of-cats/102562842>

The impact of the veterinary workforce shortage in the USA has already led to the (once unthinkable) decision to rehome undesexed kittens and puppies:  
<https://chewonthis.maddiesfund.org/2023/06/petsmart-makes-bold-change-to-spay-neuter-policy/>

As it stands, we are struggling to contain population growth in homeless cats but our efforts which see some 3,000 cats and kittens desexed every year (our shelter cats and referred cats) make an enormous impact on prevention. Delays in desexing will exponentially increase the challenge before us, with growing populations and an increased risk of feline infectious disease due to delayed vaccinations. This will place further ethical and financial burdens on veterinarians and their teams, and on animal charities, and increase moral stress on whole communities.

### **Current barriers to access**

Cost is a barrier to accessing veterinary care for people on low incomes; some of this gap is filled by animal charities like Cat Protection. Some barriers can be perceived: places one might expect to offer affordable vet care can be more expensive than other clinics.

Actual access is also a barrier: time, transport, waiting times (as noted above) and whether there even is a vet serving that community. Cat Protection’s partnership programs with Fairfield City and the City of Sydney councils have worked to address non-cost as well as cost barriers, but of course these programs are limited due to funding constraints. However, they are well-received by the communities and demonstrate a good model of cooperation.

Pet owners need to feel welcome to seek information and assistance with pet care. Cat Protection has produced several resources in languages other than English (including Auslan) <https://catprotection.org.au/community-languages/> and we have a list on our website of vet clinics where languages other than English are spoken <https://catprotection.org.au/vets-where-languages-other-than-english-are-spoken/>

**Strategies to support the current workforce, increase the number of vets and to improve access to veterinary care**

These matters have been largely referenced in the foregoing and doubtless the Committee will receive many good suggestions through this inquiry.

We reiterate that the veterinary workforce is vital to public human health and welfare and to animal health and welfare. Veterinarians, veterinary nurses and all who work in this field should be highly valued members of our communities. Animals should be valued, respected, and cared for: we would say for their intrinsic worth, but even if one disagrees with this perspective, then for the good of public health, welfare, and wellbeing.

Unfortunately, the status of animals, while improving, is not consistently high and consequently those who care for animals are viewed as working in an unimportant sector. This is reflected in employment, income, the treatment of animal charities versus human health charities, and the expectation that people who work with animals ought to do significant amounts of unpaid work (if they are paid at all).

There is a pressing need for not just the public, but critically, policy and decision-makers, to be educated on and informed by One Health/One Welfare as a strategy to deliver a better future for all.

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