

Submission to The House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment and Energy into the “Inquiry into the problem of feral and domestic cats in Australia”

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I have been a Senior Animal Management Officer for Banyule City Council for 21 years and involved in animal welfare at various shelters and pounds in the 10 years prior to that. This submission relates specifically to owned and semi-owned domestic cats in the City of Banyule, which is a local government area situated in the north-eastern region of Melbourne, Victoria. To provide some background, it is an urban / semi-urban municipality that lies between 7 and 21 km from central Melbourne, has an area of 63 km² and a population of 130,237 (as at 2018). The Yarra River runs along the City's south border, while the west is defined by the Darebin Creek. There are 15 wildlife corridors throughout the municipality and a Biodiversity Plan has been adopted by the Council.



The postcode 3081 has been the most problematic for cat management in the municipality, despite only having a population of approximately 5,500 residents. This

postcode contains the suburbs of Heidelberg West, Heidelberg Heights and Bellfield, which primarily consists of low to medium density housing developments. There are also numerous Housing Commission blocks and a higher proportion of unemployment in comparison to other suburbs in the municipality.

The prevalence of feral and domestic cats in Australia

The majority of the work that I currently do is with owned, semi-owned or unowned domestic cats in urban / semi-urban environments. I describe semi-owned and unowned cats as those that have some means of support by an individual who is providing some care to them, even if it is just food. They have some degree of socialisation but cannot always be handled. A typical “feral” cat is not social at all, cannot be handled, and has no human intervention. These types of cats would be more seen in rural / semi-rural settings, where they must fend for themselves and would need to predate wildlife and other invasive species to survive. Feral and domestic cats cannot be classified as similar as they require two completely different management strategies to be effective. Most methods to manage “feral” cats are not appropriate for the management of “domestic” cats.

Recommendation: That any further research undertaken into the management of “feral” and “domestic” cats, and any control methods that are subsequently put in place, are specific to each category of cat and the environment they are in.

The effectiveness of current legislative and regulatory approaches

Requirements for registration and confinement of cats to private property

In Victoria, the current legislative requirements are that a cat over 3 months of age must be registered and kept on the owner’s property. But as an enforcement officer it is very hard to identify the owner of a cat on a property, particularly if it has no visible identification. Unless there is an admission from the owner, this poses all sorts of problems with regards to enforcement action:

Who do you serve a Notice on to register the cat, when you can only assume an owner?

How do you know the cat comes from the property, if you cannot ascertain who owns it?

The only enforcement action that can be taken is to trap or impound the cat and, by doing this, the cat needs to be reclaimed and microchipped and registered on release.

It is also particularly difficult for low-income earners to keep a cat on private property. There are no subsidies available for residents wanting to do the right thing and keep the cat on their own property with access to a cat enclosure.

Domestic Animal Management Plans- Legislative Requirement

Section 68A of the Domestic Animal Act 1994, stipulates the requirement for councils to prepare a Domestic Animal Management Plan every 4 years. This must be sent to the Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources. A section of the plan specifically relates to over-population and high euthanasia rates, and actions to be taken to reduce this. With regards to cats, in Victoria the majority of Animal Management Officers (AMOs) act on complaints received by the public. We trap cats, then the cats go into the pound and are either reclaimed, rehoused or killed. Ultimately, the council pays their AMOs to spend their time trapping cats. When the pounds are full due to overpopulation, AMOs spend their time trapping cats, then become a taxi for a cat killing program because there is no room left for them. As an AMO, it is extremely heartbreaking to go to work each day knowing that is what your role is about. This method of cat management makes no difference to the cat intake numbers each year and the cost is high for me personally and for the cats.

Mandatory Cat Desexing

Some municipalities have introduced mandatory cat desexing, but you still need to be able to identify an owner to enforce this. Ultimately, this does not stop reproduction of the cats in society that we are not trapping or coming across via a complaint.

Low Cost Cat Desexing

Low cost desexing only works if people have some funds to get the cat desexed, but particularly in the low socio-economic areas of Banyule City Council, this is often

still too expensive for residents. The residents I deal with will not pay even a small fee, therefore the cats will never be desexed and we will continue to pick up unwanted litters of kittens for our pounds.

Australian Veterinary Association Desexing Voucher Scheme

In Victoria the Australian Veterinary Association Desexing Voucher Scheme provides vouchers for dog and cat desexing to pension card holders. Although the council and vets share the cost with the cat owner, these were not being utilised by residents, mostly due to cost. Residents simply could not afford to get their pets desexed, even at the reduced rate.

The costs are listed below for cats for the AVA Desexing Voucher Scheme:

	Desexing voucher scheme rates Effective from 1 January 2019		Discount offered by vet	Council contribution (incl of GST)
	Female	Mature (> 7 months) Immature (< 7 months)		25% off advertised rate 25% off advertised rate
Male			25% off advertised	\$35.00

Source: https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/about-us/divisions--branches/rate-form-desexing-voucher-scheme_1.pdf

Surrender Service

We do provide a free surrender service for anyone that would like to surrender a cat or kittens. As an AMO, dealing with the same residents surrendering litters of kittens each year, we could only recommend that they desex the cats. There was not a lot of help we could offer, so these cats and kittens were still going into the pound and most were being euthanased due to overcrowding in shelters. Too many kittens not enough homes.

Banyule Biodiversity Plan 2019-2022

The Biodiversity Plan 2019-2022 is in place to protect and enhance our natural environment. During the development of this plan, there was consultation between the environmental department and AMOs. This relationship was critical in the approach to

biodiversity protection in the municipality. The cat desexing program in Banyule aims to prevent the overpopulation of cats in the municipality, reducing pest cat issues that have a negative impact on our biodiversity.

Recommendations:

- **To help with containment, provide a government subsidy for affordable cat enclosures Australia-wide.**
- **Require all municipalities across Australia to produce a Domestic Animal Management Plan every 4 years.**
- **Require all municipalities across Australia to have an effective Cat Management Program that links in biodiversity plans.**
- **To have consistent legislation for cat management across Australia.**

The interaction between domestic cat ownership and the feral cat problem, and best practice approaches to the keeping of domestic cats in this regard.

The Banyule Free Cat Desexing Program



This is the kitten that changed our way of dealing with the cat overpopulation problem in our municipality. This kitten was found in a building site wall and although it was a healthy and friendly kitten, we knew the pound was full and it would be euthanased as soon as we got it there.

As the only two AMOs for Banyule, my co-worker and I sat in the carpark in front of the pound and called everyone we knew in our phone books to see if someone would take the kitten to save it. There was no one for this kitten and unfortunately, as it was a pre-weaned kitten too young to be rehomed, it was taken into the pound and killed. We knew that things had to change. The scenario with this kitten was an

everyday occurrence throughout the kitten season, and we were a cat killing taxi service again.

In 2010-2011, our cat intake statistics were appalling and we had 1,004 cats impounded into our pound, and 578 were killed (58%). These came from owner-surrenders and via the two AMOs at Banyule. There were 541 cats over 8 weeks old and 463 kittens under 8 weeks old. Dealing with this magnitude of unwanted animals was not only a full-time job through kitten season, this made animal management an extremely unpleasant and depressing job. This was not an effective way to manage cats, not mentally for me, not financially for the council and not helpful to our residents.

In 2011, a tender went out for our pound services contract for dogs. The RSPCA at Burwood East submitted a tender and were the successful contract for a three-year period. As part of the tender process, we spoke with the Council Liaison Contract Manager about cats and the issues of overpopulation and euthanasia we had within our municipality. The RSPCA were quite open to helping us with desexing cats and this is when our project began. Our wish list for a cat desexing program was to involve:

- Completely free cat desexing
- The implantation of a microchip so the cats could be traced back to an owner
- Free council registration for the first year
- A transport service provided by council AMOs for those that had none

The AMOs already knew via the cat-related complaints and cat surrenders, where the largest issues were in the municipality. The 3081, postcode was the area that we would target. The owners that have participated in the free cat desexing program have stated that it was purely due to cost that they had not already had them desexed. The fact it is free is why they have been participating and some of the residents have 3-4 cats desexed at one time.

Banyule City Council Impound Statistics 2012-2020

* Cat Protection Society Intake Records

Year	Impoundment			Outcomes			Number of cats desexed
	Cats	Kittens	Total	Euthanased	Reclaimed	Adopted	
2012-2013	311	85	396	138	23	235	40

2013-2014	298	61	359	84	24	251	40
2014-2015	319	162	481	87	37	357	120
2015-2016	393	94	487	82	65	340	138
2016-2017	224	60	284	102	51	131	130
2017-2018	233	41	274	66	38	170	177
2018-2019	176	41	217	41	24	152	60
2019-2020	119	33	152	24	30	98	75

In 2012-2014 we specifically targeted the postcode 3081, where most of our cat issues came from. One of the two desexing programs run in 2014 was opened up to all of the residents of Banyule, instead of utilising a targeted approach. Following this, the intake of cats started to rise again. In 2016-2017, we started targeting the 3081 area again, but also made it available to any other resident needing assistance, and over 50% of the cats desexed were from our target area 3081. The free cat desexing program has been running since 2013 and to date, we have desexed and microchipped 780 cats for free. The impound figures for the 2019/2020 financial year were:

- 152 Impounded
- 98 rehomed
- 24 euthanased
- 30 reclaimed

The total cost (since it commenced in 2013) for the cat desexing program is \$60,000. This amount is approximately 75% of the yearly wage for one full-time AMO. Initially, impound costs were a flat fee \$80 per cat (charged to council by the Cat Protection Society), for an 8-day holding period. The rate changed in 2018 to \$150 per cat for an 8-day holding period. Note that the cost listed in the table below would reflect what Council would be paying for cat pound contract since commencement of the desexing program on the current impound rate \$150.

2012-2013	396 cats @ \$150= \$59,400
2013-2014	359 cats @ \$150 = \$53,850
2014-2015	481 cats @ \$150 = \$72,150
2015-2016	487 cats @ \$150 = \$73,050
2016-2017	284 cats @ \$150 = \$42,600
2017-2018	274 cats @ \$150 = \$41,100
2018-2019	217 cats @ \$150 = \$32,550
2019-2020	152 cats @ \$150= \$22,800
Total Cost	\$397,500.00

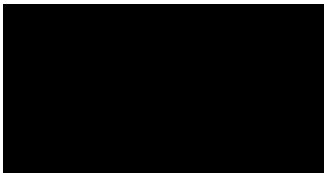
Recommendation: To implement free cat desexing programs throughout Australia. The cost of the program itself is considerably less than the price that cats, vets, shelter workers and AMOs currently pay for running trap, impound and adopt or kill programs.

Other relevant links:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjCHpNm6ToU>
- Article "Strategies to reduce the Euthanasia of Dogs and Cats used by Council's in Victoria, Australia" Rand 2018
- <https://www.banyule.vic.gov.au/.../Biodiversity-plan>

Thank you for your time with this submission.

Regards



Jenny Cotterell