



Equity in Access: Inclusive Solutions for Companion Animal Challenges

10th National G2Z Summit & Workshops
16-18 September 2025 Online

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Kristina has been CEO of Cat Protection Society of NSW since 2006. She has a BA in Social Science and her career has focused on public policy, public affairs and media, in the government and not-for-profit sectors. For 10 years she served as a layperson on the human research ethics committee of a Sydney teaching hospital. In January 2016, she was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for services to animal welfare.

Abstract

In 2023, the Cat Protection Society of NSW (Cat Protection) received a \$1.5m grant from the NSW Government for a two-year targeted cat desexing program.

Supplementing the grant with our own resources, Cat Protection developed DIVA Cats (Desexing, Identification, and Vaccination Assistance for Cats) targeting local government areas we had identified as having high populations of unowned and undesexed cats.

Between July 2023 and the end of June 2025, 3,675 cats were desexed under the DIVA program, exceeding the target of 2,750 cats.

The majority, some 2,500 cats, were from the Canterbury-Bankstown and Fairfield LGAs, two of the most culturally and linguistically diverse LGAs in Australia.

As part of the DIVA Cats program, Cat Protection commissioned specialist consultants, The LOTE Agency, to research knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs regarding cat welfare in diverse communities. We then asked The LOTE Agency to further this work with community consultations to co-design communications strategies to increase awareness of the availability and importance of early age desexing.

We will present initial outcomes, lessons learned, and future implications and welcome the opportunity to share our experience and emerging evidence.

The initiative has many learnings that can be applied by cat welfare professionals to increase equity in access to cat welfare services. NSW's diverse communities include cat owners and informal cat carers who often face barriers to desexing and ongoing cat care. Supporting cat owners and informal cat carers across diverse communities to access cat welfare services and information can help to:

- reduce unwanted litters, overpopulation, and unnecessary suffering
- improve the mental and financial wellbeing of cat owners and informal cat carers.



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Full Presentation

DIVA Cats program

The Cat Protection Society of NSW (Cat Protection) has been caring for street cats since 1958. Cat Protection was an Australian leader in the practice of early age desexing. Dr Paul Waters from Concord Animal Hospital was Cat Protection's veterinarian and from the early 1990s, every kitten adopted from Cat Protection was desexed at the time of adoption.

Cat Protection has continued to be an outspoken advocate for the benefits of early age desexing. Early age desexing offers both individual and population health and welfare benefits to cats and is the most humane strategy to manage feline homelessness. It also offers benefits to the social and natural environments, to people and other animals. Cat Protection funded professional education program for veterinarians on early age desexing that is available free of charge on our website catcare.org.au and we offer cat owners and carers a range of discounted desexing programs, including Adopt-a-Stray which includes free registration.

The DIVA Cats program offered low or no cost desexing (the fee was \$10 and capped at \$20, no matter how many cats and kittens the client was booking for desexing) with vaccination, health check, parasite treatment, microchipping and registration. Using our own data on demand for services plus practical considerations such as vet clinic partners, and areas of established relationships, we chose six target LGAs, three regional and three in metropolitan Sydney: Fairfield, Canterbury-Bankstown and City of Sydney.

In addition to the practical outcome of feline population management by desexing cats, our goal with DIVA Cats was to gain a deeper understanding of cat welfare issues by analysing demand for the DIVA Cats program and collecting data from participating local councils. Unfortunately, no local councils cooperated with our requests for data collection, and none agreed to our offers to participate in the program.

We were unable to secure a waiver of the legal requirement to register all participating cats. Many cat carers avoided the program because they would not take the risk of being fined for registering multiple cats in their own name. The registration requirement was an impediment to desexing cats in need and thus also affected our capacity to collect data and build knowledge on where and how these cats live.

Despite these limitations, mapping demand showed very clear 'hot spots' of high populations of unowned cats. In April 2025, we invited participants who had desexed multiple cats under DIVA to workshops to discuss their experiences. We will continue to work with DIVA Cats participants and will continue to build on the valuable data collected under the program to develop highly targeted cat desexing programs, particularly in the LGAs of Canterbury-Bankstown and Fairfield, which accounted for almost 70 per cent of cats desexed under the DIVA Cats program.

Culturally and linguistically diverse communities

In both Canterbury-Bankstown and Fairfield, about half the residents were born overseas and most households speak languages other than English at home.

To improve equity of access to cat welfare information and services, Cat Protection has led the way in developing materials in languages other than English, including advertisements, [translated fact sheets](#), [multilingual videos](#), and an [online directory of vets who speak community languages](#).

However, we have limited resources and have not been able to accurately measure whether these materials have been effectively reaching culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.

Despite desexing being a proven, safe, and effective method to prevent cat overpopulation, there are many barriers to accessing cat welfare services and information. Research commissioned by



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Cat Protection in 2023 showed that cost was the most significant obstacle¹. We suspected that the barriers faced by CALD communities would be much the same, with potential additional and intersecting barriers related to:

- language
- cultural norms around ownership, responsibility and what counts as care
- lower trust or familiarity with formal animal welfare services
- religious or philosophical beliefs that might affect perceptions of desexing
- economic or housing factors that shape how and where cats are cared for.

With funding from the DIVA Cats grant, Cat Protection commissioned specialist consultants, The LOTE Agency, to identify the key CALD communities in the LGAs of Canterbury-Bankstown and Fairfield, and to research knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs regarding cat welfare in those diverse communities. We then asked The LOTE Agency to expand on this with community consultations to co-design communications strategies to increase awareness of the availability and importance of early age desexing.

Cat overpopulation is a persistent issue driven by delayed desexing of owned cats and delayed or no desexing of homeless cats (who might or might not be looked after in other ways, for example, by being fed). Whether they are cared for formally or informally, undesexed cats contribute to feline overpopulation and unnecessary suffering. To address overpopulation and suffering, feline welfare services must reach out to both cat owners and informal carers with tailored approaches that resonate with individuals and communities.

People and cats are unique

It's important to note that this project didn't seek to generalise or stereotype people; the concept of "CALD communities" has many limitations and risks.

We recognise that communities based on, for example, a common language, cultural tradition, or religion will comprise a diverse range of unique individuals.

The utility of this project was first to identify key populations so that limited resources would be used effectively; and secondly, to engage in conversations with people from those key population groups about cat welfare issues to understand whether they faced barriers to accessing cat care that were particular to their community, and if so, how these might be addressed.

Should you wish to do something similar in your own local communities, census and council data can provide a wealth of information about local community demographics.

The LOTE Agency project began with desktop research to identify the main non-English language groups in Canterbury-Bankstown and Fairfield which would then inform the focus of consultations. Those consultations included guided community listening sessions and community interviews, and workshops to co-design communication strategies to address barriers to cat desexing and to increase early age desexing.

The process of bringing people together to have a conversation about cat welfare is to start developing constructive relationships. Consultations don't need to be difficult but will work best if they are guided. An independent facilitator can foster trust in the process. Consultations must not become compliance forums. Conversations should be respectful and confidential.

¹ Cat Welfare Survey, Prepared for Cat Protection Society of NSW by Ipsos, August 2023

<https://catprotection.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Cat-welfare-survey-2023-ipsos-report.pdf>



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Participants might be asked:

- What do they know and think about cats in their neighbourhood?
- Are they aware that kittens as young as 16 weeks can have kittens themselves?
- Do they know where to access veterinary services? Feline welfare services? Are they aware of the cost or that they might be able to access low-cost veterinary services including desexing?
- Who would they trust most for information?
- How would they prefer to receive information, for example, social media, community leader in person, infographics, community language radio?

Multicultural communications strategies

For Canterbury-Bankstown and Fairfield LGAs, the key language groups are Arabic, Vietnamese, Mandarin and Cantonese, noting that there is a diversity of cultures and religions within these language groups, and significant differences between generations and whether people's backgrounds are rural or urban. In rural areas (in many nations, including Australia) cats are often regarded as 'pest control' and left to their own devices to manage rodent populations. Younger generations, especially in urban areas, are more likely to regard cats as highly cherished indoor pets than older generations.

Spending money on cats is sometimes seen as a misplaced priority; again, this is not unique to any cultural or linguistic group but is more likely influenced by current or recent financial hardship. Cat Protection's Ipsos surveys consistently find the cost of desexing is overestimated by people who have not desexed their cats. A simple strategy to address this barrier of perceived cost is to promote the price of desexing, especially for affordable welfare programs.

A strong theme emerged in faith-driven communities which was mirrored in our DIVA Cats Workshop survey findings: that caring for cats is a moral duty; that to respect the Creator, one must respect what they have created, which means treating cats with compassion and kindness. Where faith led to concerns about desexing as potentially interfering with nature, these concerns were often allayed when the health and welfare benefits of cat desexing were fully explained.

Consistent with previous Ipsos survey findings, the LOTE Agency focus group discussions found that information on the health and welfare benefits of cat desexing would positively influence a person's decision to desex their cat.

For cat owners, our pilot multicultural communications strategy will focus on early age desexing and building awareness, confidence and urgency. Our research shows around 90 per cent of owned cats are eventually desexed², but many are desexed too late, often after they've had a chance to breed. Desexing before 12 weeks of age is safe, effective, and prevents accidental litters, yet many cat owners are unaware of this window or delay the decision due to uncertainty, cultural beliefs, or low access to trusted information.

For informal cat carers, our pilot strategy will focus on increasing visibility, validation, and support, helping people feel recognised, capable and empowered to act. There are many cats who are cared for by individuals who do not see themselves as owners, but who feed, shelter, or protect cats in their local areas. These informal carers act out of kindness or community spirit but face significant

² Cat Welfare Survey, Ipsos, August 2023



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barriers to taking further action, such as lack of authority, fear of judgment, or confusion about available support. Their role remains largely invisible and unsupported.

To improve equity in access to cat welfare services, we must make it easy for people to know where, when and how to access affordable desexing services, and we must create clear, welcoming pathways to support.

Priority messages for cat owners:

- Desexing can and should happen before 12 weeks of age
- Desexing is caring and responsible
- Risks of waiting and the benefits of early action
- Responsible owners act early to protect their cats.

For informal cat carers:

- Cat welfare services are an ally, ready to help
- Taking small but meaningful actions
- Informal care is a legitimate and valued form of protection.

Recommended communication channels

In addition to the key messages to be communicated, our research, participant focus groups and interviews also identified effective communication channels, for use with community languages in targeted geographical areas. To meet people where they are, communications should use a mix of trusted, familiar, and culturally resonant touchpoints, such as:

- Social media
- Supermarkets, shopping centres, chemists, and local libraries
- Community notice boards and street posters
- Religious and community centres
- Community radio
- Trusted messengers (vets and vet nurses, community cat carers and local champions, spiritual or faith-based leaders).

Cat Protection's challenge now is to develop detailed action plans and to find funding to support these pilot communications strategies in our target LGAs.

Meanwhile, we trust that this project offers useful insights for other feline welfare services seeking to connect with underserved communities.

Cat Protection Society of NSW welcomes the opportunity to share our experience. For more information, please contact info@catprotection.org.au