



GETTING 2 ZERO SUBMISSION

Clarifying South Australian Cat Management Laws 2024 Consultation

Getting to Zero (G2Z) is a national program providing free, remote, and onsite, consulting and support services for local government, not-for-profit organisations, and community groups to improve outcomes for lost/stray and homeless animals, and their caretakers, in every community in Australia.

G2Z works closely with governments, animal welfare organisations and researchers and has specific and practical knowledge on what is required to reduce the population of free-roaming cats around areas of human habitation and infrastructure.

G2Z understands **WHAT** the proposed changes set out to achieve.

G2Z DISAGREES with **HOW** the changes are proposed to be achieved.

Introduction

G2Z understands the complex pressures facing Government departments, and Not For Profits, involved in cat management. Our commitment lies in fostering successful, evidence-based strategies that prioritise animal welfare and harmonious human-animal coexistence.

There exists a global shift within the Animal Management sector toward mitigating the root causes that drive the need for management of free roaming cat populations. This redirection entails effectively reducing the reliance on “end stage” policies and practices such as intaking, holding, rehoming, transferring, or euthanising. The proposed legislative



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amendments do not address the fundamental and multifaceted causes leading to the existence of free roaming cats. Challenges and suboptimal outcomes will persist by the introduction of the proposed changes, as well as the development of new challenges.

The reduction in population of free roaming cats, nuisance issues, and clearer legislative processes, are the essential issues to be addressed by the proposed changes in legislation. Making gains in reducing the population of free roaming cats, and associated nuisance issues, also reduces negative impacts on people who care about cats, people who live in proximity to cats and those involved in the sectors tasked with managing cats. Trapping and killing (with or without impoundment and holding) is an extremely expensive exercise for Local Government (LG) (Rand et al 2019). Reallocating the limited resources to more progressive, effective, humane, and socially acceptable and equitable cat management practices is possible and advised. The key findings from the, soon to be published, scientific paper, ‘Rethinking Urban Cat Management: Reflections on critical success factors’ (Cotterell et al., 2024), are that targeted desexing is significantly cheaper, takes around 2 years to see statistically measurable and impactful reductions in cat populations and intake, and that it results in better LG-community relationships.

As society in general becomes more aware of the volume of cat trapping, impounding and subsequent killing that is undertaken by councils around the nation, the pressure on LG to do better is becoming more intense. Some states are experiencing considerable political and community backlash with the demand for change becoming more insistent. South Australia has an opportunity to reconsider its current and proposed approach to cat management and provide its Animal Management professionals with the ability and support to do things differently now, rather than being forced into making inevitable changes in the future. These opportunities will reduce the negative health, and welfare impacts on the AM sector, the community and the cats themselves.



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We recommend that the South Australian Government work towards the development of root cause solutions rather than implement legislative changes that will only serve to act on the symptoms of the cat management issue as a whole.

Recommendations

1. **Align definitions of cat cohorts with current understanding of how cats live:** Cats with some dependence (direct or indirect) on humans need to be defined as domestic cats. Cats who have no relationship with or dependence on humans and reproduce in the wild should be defined as feral cats.
2. **Implement humane and ethical reduction strategies of free roaming cat populations around human environments:** Explore alternative pathways to reduce community cat populations rather than increase the influx of kittens and young adult cats into the system.
3. **Reevaluate existing and proposed intake system:** Explore existing local and international strategies that are best practice, financially sustainable and effective.
4. **Improve collaboration and information sharing including data collection and availability:** Collect data from all entities involved in intake/outcomes for cats and ensure it is publicly accessible. Provide guidance to SA Local Governments on its use to inform animal management, funding, and progress assessment.
5. **Provision of desexing services and support:** Consult with stakeholders to provide broadscale HQHVSN services to the sector, and communities more broadly.
6. **Consider the current adequacy, and future costs involved to cope with the proposed amendments:** The proposed legislative amendments will generate significant financial pressure on relevant stakeholders. This budget could be spent more productively.
7. **Consider the funding and facilitation of a holistic approach to cat management:** Reallocation of budget for proposed (and existing) amendments would ensure more effective and sustainable outcomes.



8. **Revise proposed legislative amendments for efficacy and best practice:** Consider long term political and social expectations AND health and welfare effects on Animal Management personnel, and use the current opportunity to position South Australia as a leader in cat management by changing existing focus.

Australia and cats

The unique reproductive capacity of cats, with sexual maturity attained as early as 16 weeks old, coupled with the potential for multiple litters, underscores the profound challenge of addressing the surplus of homeless and abandoned kittens compared to puppies ([Chua et al., 2023](#)). This dynamic intricately influences the proportion of cats that can be rehomed.

Additionally, the phenomenon of free-roaming, undesexed urban cats—whether owned, semi-owned, or unowned—serves to compound the issue, contributing to feral cat populations. It is imperative to acknowledge that the complexities surrounding cat breeding issues are markedly distinct from those concerning dogs.

The expectations being placed on Local Government, not for profit and community-based animal rescue and welfare organisations regarding cat management are growing rapidly. There is increasing pressure to manage domestic cats differently to how they have been managed historically, and in other jurisdictions around Australia. Contemporary society places immense value on evidence-based strategies that are humane, economical, and effective.

International Best Practice and industry trends

Nationally and internationally, Local Governments are moving toward prioritising community support over enforcement-centric animal management ([National Animal Care & Control Association, 2021](#); [Human Animal Support Services, 2024](#); [Wheeler, 2023 conference presentation](#); [Goode and Tonks, 2023 conference presentation](#)), working with



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animal welfare and sheltering organisations and the community to find no or least harm solutions to the long-term challenge of managing domestic cats.

Some Australian Councils are recognising the importance of adequately funding animal welfare and sheltering organisations to better enable them to continue to do a significant portion of companion animal management work, either alongside Councils by taking in stray and surrendered animals for the municipality into their own shelters, or by providing management services for council impound and holding facilities. Currently however, this funding is tied to numbers of animals taken into care, limiting the ability of these organisations to take a more proactive approach. Helping with funding to enable companion animal sheltering and rehoming organisations to extend their services to intake prevention and proactively reducing reproduction of companion animals in the community through desexing programs is an important next step.

Animal management is a human issue and therefore a social issue. Hawes ([Hawes et al., 2022](#)) states that “Achieving positive and sustained change on many of today’s most pressing social issues calls for an increasingly complex understanding of social-ecological systems and the mechanisms that contribute to the resilience of a community.” This is certainly true when looking at the interface between animal management, animal welfare, environmental protection, community welfare and policy development. Traditional policy development is often characterised by a singular-issue orientation and can tend to overlook the intricate interdependencies among challenges. Globally, the approach to companion animal management and welfare is evolving into a framework that operationalises One Health and One Welfare concepts while critically addressing underlying factors ([Tarazona et al., 2020](#)).

Central to this transformative approach is the development of policies centered around humanity, cultural sensitivity, equity, environmental stewardship, diversity competence, and social justice. It is evident that punitive approaches are yielding to proactive support-



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based models in animal management practices ([Wolf et al., 2022](#)). The interconnectedness of the issues within the realm of animal management underscores the imperative of adopting innovative and holistic approaches for achieving transformative outcomes. It is with this perspective that we advocate for a fresh and collaborative problem-solving model to yield outcomes distinct from historical courses of action.

Cats in society

The management of cats in the community is necessarily complex due to a multitude of factors related to the cats themselves, the environments they live in, and the people they live alongside. Cats predate on native and other wildlife to varying degrees depending on many factors - their individual characteristics (e.g., age, personality), where they live, how they are cared for by humans, and sources of food ([Dickman and Newsome, 2015](#)). Accessibility of resources, services such as animal shelters and veterinary clinics, and methods to manage cat populations varies according to location, with more options typically available in urban than remote areas. Additionally, division of cat management responsibilities between levels of government is based on human-centric factors, such as population density and land ownership, resulting in disjointed and sometimes conflicting cat management practices occurring across the landscape.

Urban stray cats are predominantly owned or cared for by someone (semi-owners or cat caretakers) and have varying levels of socialisation. People feed them because these cats visit or live nearby their properties or workplaces and they want to help them ([Ma et al., 2023](#)). Approximately 3% of Australian adults feed an average of 1.5 cats that are not their cat and have no known owner ([Rand et al., 2019](#)). While these cats are rarely desexed or microchipped, the people caring for them demonstrate strong bonds with these cats comparable to those between owners and owned cats, even when one person is feeding multiple cats they do not own ([Crawford et al., 2023](#); [Scotney et al., 2023](#); [Neal & Wolf 2023](#); [Zito et al., 2015](#)). Crawford and colleagues ([2023](#)) found that many of these cat



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caregivers (semi-owners) reported the cat helps them through tough times. Caregivers feed the cats once or twice daily and talk to the cats daily. Harm to free-roaming cats has a significant impact on the mental health and well-being of the people who own or feed them ([Scotney et al., 2023](#))

Cats who live around humans have some degree of socialisation, even if contact is indirect and they appear unsocialised if trapped, thus determining whether cats in populated areas are owned, semi-owned or unowned is difficult ([Slater et al., 2013](#)). Cats can also easily transition between these categories at different times and under differing circumstances ([Slater et al., 2010](#)). All cats are individuals and have different genetic makeup and experiences that determine how they will react in any given situation. Even if cats appear to be unsocialised in a cage trap or do not have a microchip or collar, they may be a lost owned cat or a free living cat with a bonded human caregiver that would take ownership if given the opportunity ([Crawford et al., 2023](#)). According to Slater (2013), many cats only show their normal behaviour once they are removed from a stress-inducing environment of a trap or a holding facility. When trapped, even socialised cats often display unsociable behaviour due to the stressful experience and environment. It is common that once settled in a less stressful environment they display very different, more sociable, behaviour. The difficulty in identifying cats ‘adoptable’ cats using traditional sheltering approaches, along with multiple other factors, strongly impacts cat outcomes once they enter the shelter system ([Kilgour & Flockhart, 2022](#)).

Identification of owned cats through visible identification or microchipping is also not reliable. Many owned cats are not microchipped ([Rand et al., 2023](#)) and it is common for microchip details to be not kept up to date leading to an inability to reunite the animal with its owner ([Goodwin et al., 2017](#)). As well, microchips may not be read through a metal cage trap ([Lord et al., 2008](#)); if best practice procedures are not being followed by the trapper, the trapped cat may not even have the opportunity to be scanned before it is killed. Many owners do not put a collar on their cat for fear of injury ([Lord et al., 2010](#)). Through



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our work with Local Governments across Australia, G2Z can confirm that supportive strategies that can be utilised to address challenges related to identifying the ownership status and sociability of trapped cats are not currently being employed on a widespread basis.

Ma and colleagues ([2023](#)), found that cat semi-ownership is more common in low socioeconomic areas where the cost of sterilisation for owned and semi-owned cats is often unaffordable for cat caretakers. Cat semi-owners have very similar characteristics to cat owners in the same area, and cat semi-owners often also own one or more cats. Semi-owners feeding 1 to 2 cats represent a huge pool of adopters for these cats, who are often poorly socialised and would otherwise be at high risk of euthanasia. By providing free desexing, microchipping and (if necessary) registration for these cats, many semi-owners can be converted to owners. Helping cat semi-owners to have their cats desexed, microchipped and to adopt the cats they are caring for is a holistic, One Welfare approach which will improve the wellbeing of people, animals and the environment, as well as increase public support for cat management initiatives.

Semi-owned cats are not feral cats, despite displaying behaviours which may make them challenging to adopt into pet homes without a long period of socialisation. Admitting them to a shelter or municipal pound is often a death sentence ([RSPCA Australia, 2022](#)). Most are healthy or treatable (i.e. reasonably healthy, reasonably well-adjusted pets over the age of eight weeks or dogs and cats who are able to be rehabilitated if given the care typically provided to pets by reasonable and caring pet owners/guardians in the community ([Maddies Fund](#))), and for Local Government and Not For Profit shelter staff having few options other than euthanasia for these cats, constant intake and euthanasia of semi-owned cats is traumatising ([Rollin, 2011](#); [Scotney et al., 2015](#); [Andrukonis and Protopopova, 2020](#)). Veterinary personnel that have to euthanase these cats are at particular risk of moral injury and psychological distress ([Scotney, McLaughlin and Keates, 2015](#)). Recent



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changes to Australian Work Health and Safety Regulations clarifying employer responsibilities to provide psychologically safe work environments, and increasing accountability for those who do not appropriately control for psychosocial and psychological injuries (<https://www.apsc.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/aps-professional-streams/aps-hr-professional-stream/aps-hr-professional-news/psychosocial-safety>), will likely impact the long term sustainability of broadscale trap and kill approaches to managing domestic cats, due to their known strongly negative impact on the health and welfare of staff performing these tasks.

Recommendation 1. Align definitions of cat cohorts with current understanding of how cats live

The ecological niches filled by feral cats and domestic cats are very different. Feral cats live independently of humans in remote areas and management methods can be mostly decided without regard to impacts on humans living in these areas. Domestic cats live with and alongside humans who care for and are bonded to them ([Zito et al., 2015](#)), so management measures for these cats must consider the impacts of humans on the methods chosen, and of the method chosen on the humans affected. Classing semi-owned and unowned domestic cats as feral cats, ignores the significant differences between the environments in which these cats exist and is inconsistent with RSPCA's 2018 Best Practice Domestic Cat Management report ([Identifying best practice domestic cat management in Australia – May 2018](#)).

In order to effectively manage cats who fulfil different ecological niches across the spectrum of human population density and involvement, it is essential that we identify and classify these different groups of animals and apply specific strategies to reduce their numbers while achieving community, animal welfare, and ecological goals.

G2Z has worked with stakeholders from 2014 to develop consistent national definitions of cats (<https://www.g2z.org.au/national-cat-action-plan.html>) which align with those in



RSPCA Australia's 'Identifying Best Practice Domestic Cat Management in Australia' (RSPCA Australia, 2018). These are:

- **Domestic cats:** cats with some dependence (direct or indirect) on humans. The three sub-categories of domestic cats are:
 - i. **Owned** – these cats are identified with and cared for by a specific person and are directly depending on humans. They are usually sociable although sociability varies.
 - ii. **Semi-owned** – these cats are fed or provided with other care by people who do not consider they own them. They are of varying sociability with many socialised to humans and may be associated with one or more households.
 - iii. **Unowned** – these cats are indirectly dependent on humans with some having casual and temporary interactions with humans. They are of varying sociability, including some who are unsocialised to humans.
- **Feral cats** are unowned, unsocialised, have no relationship with or dependence on humans, and live and reproduce in the wild (e.g. in forests, grasslands, deserts). *This definition is aligned with feral cat definitions in the Australian Government Threat Abatement Plan (2015).*
- **Stray cats** are cats who wander (straying refers to the activity of wandering away, not an ownership status). Stray cats may be:
 - i. responsibly owned and temporarily escape from their property (e.g. a gate or door left open),
 - ii. casually owned and wander from their property regularly,
 - iii. semi-owned (e.g. cats making regular visits to one or more households which do not own them, but who may be currently owned, or lost or abandoned).
 - iv. born to previously owned cats and live in colonies, directly or indirectly being fed by humans.



Cats who live near people all need to be defined as domestic cats who may move along the cat continuum from being owned, semi-owned or unowned. Domestic cat management requires different strategies from feral cat management due to the resources available, cat and human behaviour and social implications for cat management strategies. Many community members, organisations and Veterinarians are willing to help with humane, sustainable and effective management solutions to prevent further breeding and reduce numbers, provided support services, such as access to low/no cost desexing, vaccination and microchipping, are available for those who need it.

Recommendation 2: Implement humane and ethical reduction strategies of free roaming cat populations around human environments

G2Z supports effective, humane and ethical actions to reduce populations of free-roaming cats around areas of human habitation and infrastructure.

G2Z recommends that well-managed, well-funded supportive programs including targeted free cat desexing, replace ‘trap and kill’ as the default foundation of all domestic cat management.

G2Z suggests that alternatives to trapping and removal of adult cats, especially those with whom a community member has an existing bond, be avoided at all costs. Alternatives may include suspension or removal of fines for non-compliance with existing mandatory requirements for cat owners (e.g. desexing).

While we are making our way towards the reduction of free roaming cats, we need to be careful not to alienate those who don't consider themselves as ‘owners’. Language matters and we need to ensure inclusivity. We need to ensure that legislation is not exclusive of



those cats and their caretakers that do not yet conform with it. The emphasis must be on “the future” and it must be understood that there will always be people and cats that cannot conform to the legislation.

Management of domestic cats who are on Crown land that is adjacent to or close by to human habitation and infrastructure, should be consistent with management practices for cats in the residential areas. Animal Management (AM) departments and those working on cat control on Crown land must closely collaborate and coordinate activities, to ensure that domestic cat management actions are carried out appropriately.

G2Z recommends unified strategies by Local Government animal management, animal welfare and sheltering organisations, human welfare organisations, conservationists and ecologists, and communities to achieve the best outcome for people, cats and wildlife. Working together using evidence-driven and tailored approaches to address the challenges and needs of each situation and community achieves ‘buy-in’ from both stakeholders and the local community, and most efficiently resources to achieve joint goals. Additionally, active sharing of resources between stakeholders within the sector speeds progress in process development across the sector and prevents ‘reinventing the wheel’ within individual communities.

Well-managed, supportive programs to manage domestic cats, implemented collaboratively by Animal Management Officers, animal welfare and sheltering organisations, and community volunteers have been shown to be effective in sustainably reducing cat populations in both the Australian and international context. Strategies shown to effectively engage the community and reduce cat populations in communities include free and low cost desexing, vaccination and microchipping of domestic cats, along with other supports such as capture, transportation, adoption, and encouraging and facilitating containment of pets cats ([Swarbrick and Rand 2018](#); [Rand et al., 2019](#); [Spehar & Wolf 2019](#); [Kreisler et al., 2019](#); [Spehar & Wolf 2020](#)). These structured and sustained programs



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are evidence-driven and utilise multiple strategies for reducing cat numbers and improving the health and welfare of cats, people, and the environment. These strategies are socially acceptable and equitable, and the least harmful means of reducing cat numbers, provided that all categories of domestic cats (i.e., owned, semi-owned and unowned) are included in management programs ([Crawford et al., 2023](#)).

In addition to preventing growth of cat populations and reducing cat numbers over time, desexing also significantly reduces fighting and wandering for reproductive purposes; these are common causes of nuisance complaints to councils, leading to cats being trapped, impounded, and killed. Reduction in impoundment and killing of cats due to nuisance complaints, in turn reduces negative impacts related to lethal control methods on the community members who care about cats, and those tasked with carrying out trap and kill tasks.

Importantly, given the constrained resources available for Local Governments to implement domestic cat management, trapping and killing (with or without impoundment and holding) of domestic cats is an extremely expensive exercise ([Rand et al., 2019](#)). Desexing programs delivered using best practice principles of ‘microtargeting’ cats from high intake areas are comparatively cheaper and more effectively reduce cat population numbers than trap and kill approaches. Reallocating the limited resources available to more progressive, effective, humane and socially acceptable and equitable cat management practices is both possible and advised.

Well-managed community desexing programs in urban/peri-urban areas where there is no immediate threat to threatened native species, enable communities to manage cats ethically and reduce their numbers over the long term. In Portland, Oregon, USA, Local Government animal management, Not For Profit animal welfare and sheltering organisations and bird conservation groups work together to develop solutions appropriate for that community



and environment. <https://audubonportland.org/our-work/protect/habitat-and-wildlife/urban/cats-safe-at-home-campaign/>

Given the complexity of human, environmental and cat factors that impact management decisions across the diversity of communities in South Australia, it is vital that approaches to cat management are not black and white. Cat population characteristics and cat-human relationships do not conform to definitions based on land ownership, and as such, management of cats across private and public land must be carefully integrated.

Most people now support desexing of cats and those who can afford to desex their cats do. However, lack of resources prevents people on low incomes getting cats desexed i.e. they can't afford the large vet payment, or carriers or sometimes even a car or petrol to get their cat(s) to the vet. The strongest predictor for whether a cat in a household is desexed is family income (Chu et al 2009). This is compounded in lower socio-economic areas where one undesexed cat in the household can lead to 5-10 cats in a year (one or two litters) further increasing the difficulty in affording the desexing of multiple cats. Desexing and microchipping a female cat can cost between \$300 to \$500 depending on whether it is pregnant or lactating (common in spring and summer), and which veterinary clinic is providing the service. Mandated desexing is a huge barrier to semi-cat owners (people feeding more or more stray cats) taking ownership of these cats, which is a key solution to the problem.

Given the growing body of evidence showing that targeted cat desexing programs centred on proactive, supportive community engagement, are essential, it is critical to appreciate the lessons learned by those who have gone before us. We can look to both international and Australian examples of how effective control of reproduction in urban cat populations can be achieved through working together with the community to desex, microchip and



vaccinate community cats, and where possible adopt out sociable cats or have caretakers become cat owners.

We have three robust Australian examples of how effective this approach can be:

- The [Banyule Desexing Program in Victoria](#) which consistently demonstrated a two thirds reduction in intake, a greater than 5 fold reduction in euthanasia, and improvements in relationships between animal management staff and community members, through targeted free desexing of cats from high intake areas.
- The Community Cat Programs led by the [Australian Pet Welfare Foundation](#) with the initial pilot area in the greater Ipswich area of Queensland, where microtargeting of cats from high intake properties reduced in cat intakes by council by 30-50% within one year.
- The RSPCA NSW ‘[Keeping Cats Safe at Home](#)’ program in which RSPCA partners with councils to implement proactive and targeted desexing of cats cared for by local community members, using microtargeting to quickly reduce free-living cat populations.

Key learnings from existing programs include:

- Program success hinges on effective recruitment of cat caretakers, especially those from multi-cat sites, into the program (Cotterell et al 2024; [Rand 2023](#)). This involves trust building and open communication with community members, supported by enforcement applied as a last resort where voluntary compliance could not be achieved through complete removal of barriers and assistance to facilitate desexing, vaccination, and identification services.
- Focus on microtargeting of individual properties and streets with high numbers of sexually entire cats is most effective at achieving reproductive control over



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urban cat populations ([Ma, AIAM webinar 2022](#)). This requires a specific focus on working with all caretakers that are supporting a breeding population of sexually entire cats.

- N.B. To perform targeted programs, AM teams require accurate information about cat populations within their municipality, including:

- Detailed information about community complaints about cats. This should include location, type of nuisance, whether a caretaker or owner is known or suspected by the complainant, and whether the council followed up with residents in surrounding properties to ascertain who is caring for the cat/s involved.
- Increasing or introducing additional mandatory ownership requirements creates or heightens barriers to carers taking ownership ([Cotterell et al., 2024](#); [Australian Pet Welfare Foundation Response to Draft Threat Abatement Plan, 2023](#)). Programs should strive to eliminate all barriers to ownership in order to recruit carers, then facilitate improved behaviours by leveraging relationships with caretakers that develop through the program delivery.
- Collaborative relationships between AM teams, other Council departments and community service organisations are critical to improve the reach and impact of the program within target areas ([Cotterell et al 2024](#)). This includes both animal-centric organisations such as volunteer-run rescues, and human-centric organisations such as housing support, community Neighbourhood Houses, and other support services that interact with residents in target areas.
- Monitoring and evaluating program outcomes is imperative to assist in further program development and assessment. This requires detailed information



collection systems (although not necessarily complex) collecting, including but not limited to:

- The number and location of cat carers or semi owners who took ownership of a cat/s through the program
- The number of desexings, microchips, vaccinations and registrations that were provided through the program, and how many were provided for free vs low cost.
- The number, age and sex of cats that were desexed and microchipped to their carers through the program (Note: Some carers may take ownership of more than one cat)
- If possible, information on whether the cat has produced kittens
- The number of complainants (and type of complaints) who engage with council to help identify the source property of cats creating nuisance issues in their neighbourhood
- In addition to the total number of cat traps hired by members of the public, information should be collected about:
 - ◇ Who the traps are hired by (e.g. complainant or a cat caretaker who is participating in the program)
 - ◇ Whether council officers are delivering, monitoring, and managing traps (if yes, how many and which ones)
 - ◇ Whether members of the public paid fees (and how much) to hire traps
- For all cats brought into care, data should be collected to allow identification of the source cohort of the cats, including evidence of human interaction at time intake, age, health and behavioural information, and ultimate outcome. This allows more accurate



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assessment of the impact of targeted desexing on different cohorts of cats in the community. Example data points to collect include:

- ◇ Desexing status and sex
 - ◇ Microchip status
 - ◇ Presence of signs of human interaction (e.g. collars or tags, indicators of previous vet care)
 - ◇ Estimated age (or age cohort)
 - ◇ Health information
 - ◇ Objective description of behaviour
 - ◇ Outcome
- It typically takes 1-2 years of targeted desexing of cats from high intake areas to reduce intake numbers ([Australian Pet Welfare Foundation FAQs Community Cat Programs](#)) and uptake into targeted desexing programs typically starts at low levels and builds over time as word gets out and local knowledge of, and confidence in, the program expands.
 - In early stages of desexing programs, adult cats with poorer socialisation status typically make up a substantial portion of the cats in the program. These cats may require trapping despite being cared for and bonded to an individual in the community (Personal Communication, Jennifer Cotterell 2024).

It is crucial for field officers to be mindful that residents in target cohorts will often have histories of negative interactions with regulatory authorities and this may present a challenge during recruitment. Effective communication of the goals of the program and benefits to cat carers and semi-owners is critical to uptake by residents.



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The Victorian Government will soon be launching a pilot ‘Targeted Cat Desexing Program’ to be delivered by Local Government and as part of its state-wide Cat Management Strategy. This program is providing funds to LG via a grants program and comes as a result of the work undertaken by the Victorian Cat Management Working Group over the past 2 years and feedback from the recent consultation for the Draft Cat Management Strategy. This approach to cat management is becoming a more normalised and accepted approach to managing free roaming cats.

Recommendation 3: Reevaluate existing and proposed intake system

The admission of animals into the animal management and rehoming system has potential to do unintended harm to both people and pets ([Quain, 2019](#)). This process introduces several challenges that lead to stress, subsequently impacting the immediate health and welfare of the animals and people involved. Transitioning from familiar environments to unfamiliar ones, confinement, isolation, transportation, handling by unfamiliar individuals, exposure to noise and unfamiliar scents are among the challenges faced. Furthermore, factors such as sleep disruption, unfamiliar diets, slippery surfaces, inadequate exercise, and enrichment opportunities contribute to boredom, frustration, and prolonged states of heightened arousal in the animals under care. In addition, the financial costs associated with admitting animals into the system, including daily care expenses, facility maintenance, and staffing, are significant considerations ([Kremer, 2021](#)). Equally important is the cost to staff well-being, encompassing moral stress and compassion fatigue, which leads to mental strain and high staff turnover rates ([Paul et al., 2023](#)). The costs to owners and caretakers of companion animals in this situation must also not be underestimated.

Therefore, we propose that South Australian State and Local Government stakeholders collectively re-evaluate the necessity of placing each individual animal within the



conventional pound/shelter system. It is imperative to explore the feasibility of achieving positive outcomes by providing support to animals within their existing environments or through alternative strategies. As the peak body for animal management professionals, we are consistently hearing from Local Government and non-profit/community organisations across Australia regarding substantial capacity challenges stemming predominantly from broader societal factors. These challenges exert substantial pressure on already stretched systems and the dedicated personnel involved in their daily operations. Recognising the driving forces behind this pressure is pivotal in devising alternative, more effective, and sustainable frameworks.

As society in general becomes more aware of the volume of cat trapping, impounding and subsequent killing that is undertaken by councils around the nation, the pressure on LG to do better is becoming more intense. Some states are experiencing considerable political and community backlash with the demand for change becoming more insistent. South Australia has an opportunity to reconsider its current and proposed approach to cat management and provide its Animal Management professionals with the ability and support to do things differently now, rather than being forced into making inevitable changes in the future. These opportunities will reduce the negative health and welfare impacts on the AM sector, the community and the cats themselves.

Owned companion animals

The influx of owned animals into the animal management system (whether by surrender or impound) is closely linked to various human-centric factors that limit owners' capacity to care for their companion animals. A recent Australian study conducted by McDowell and colleagues utilises the Social Determinants of Health model to examine the contributors to ownership challenges and negative pet welfare outcomes (McDowall et al., 2023). This model aligns with research from Canada (Ly et al., 2021a) (Ly et al., 2021b), the United States (Hoffman et al., 2021), and a systematic review encompassing Australian studies



(Lambert et al., 2015), all highlighting that factors such as unstable housing, financial stress, significant family changes (e.g., divorce, bereavement), and limited access to necessary pet care resources play pivotal roles in companion animal relinquishment and unfavourable welfare consequences. Regrettably, there is little publicly available intake data from South Australia and it is difficult to ascertain whether the experiences in South Australia mirror these trends. Consequently, it is encouraged that more comprehensive data collection be prioritised to facilitate the development of targeted preventative strategies, which will be expanded upon later in this submission.

In contrast to past approaches focused on education and enforcement in animal management, achieving a decline in intake rates and enhancing animal welfare entails a multifaceted strategy. This includes providing field support to both pets and owners to enhance owners' ability to care for their animals (as demonstrated in the joint statement by leading US organisations on maintaining Capacity For Care through field support services and the Best Friends Intake Diversion in the Field Playbook). Diverting pets through direct rehoming where feasible (Ly & Protopopova, 2023a), and advocating for societal shifts that empower more individuals to retain their pets, such as modifications to rental laws and the provision of widespread accessible and free or low-cost desexing and veterinary services (Humane Pro Pets For Life), are all integral components of this approach.

Significant findings from existing programs and research in this domain inform the implementation of owner support services. For instance:

- The National Desexing Network Cooperative Desexing program has been very effective in the Gold Coast City Council (Qld) area (an area with a population of around 635,000 people). The costs of this program are shared between the Council, owner, local Vet Clinics and the National Desexing Network. If there are NFP animal welfare groups in the area with capacity, they are also encouraged to



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participate in the program. The intake of cats from the GCCC area has steadily decreased from over 3500 annually to around 2000 cats annually from FY 01/02 to 18/19. The intake of kittens has roughly halved from 3830 in FY 01/02 to 1847 20/21. The program has also been delivered in other municipalities around Australia e.g. Camden Council (NSW) (human population 94,000) which has seen a reduction of cat intake of over 70% for the FY periods 11/12 – 17/18.

- Field-based support services consistently yield superior outcomes for both owners and pets, surpassing the effectiveness of shelter-based services for owners seeking to relinquish their pets (Seattle Animal Shelter Foundation, 2022 “[Shelter diversion keeps pets happy, healthy, and with their families](#)”)
- Pet retention and intake diversion programs have led to substantial reductions in surrendered pet intake by as much as 50% ([Jacksonville Humane Society](#)) and 87% ([Ly & Protopopova, 2023b](#))
- Field officers achieve improved compliance, better relationships with the community, and reduced intake of pets into the system by taking a holistic, ‘support first’ approach to animal management ([Moss et al., 2023](#)).

Barriers to proactive program implementation by local governments are frequently tied to funding and staffing limitations ([Russo et al., 2023](#)).

Free living cats

In contrast to dogs, the influx of cats into the animal management system primarily stems from the admission of community cats. These community cat intakes exhibit a seasonal pattern. Notably, in densely populated areas, free-living cat populations often coexist with human communities, although the individuals caring for these cats seldom perceive themselves as traditional owners ([Zito et al., 2015](#)) ([Zito et al., 2018](#)).



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It is not possible to analyse the animal intake and outcome data for South Australia as it is not publicly accessible, however, Australian research indicates a national return-to-owner rate for cats of approximately 5% ([Chua et al., 2023](#)). This Australian trend fits with what we know, that the intake of “stray” cats far outweighs that of owned cats which suggests that many the cats in municipal or NFP shelters do not have an “owner” to reclaim them ([Marston & Bennett, 2009](#)).

It is imperative to consider whether the inclusion of these community cats within the system is truly necessary, or if a more efficacious, financially sustainable, and socially acceptable alternative pathway could be established to regulate the reproductive dynamics of community cat populations and mitigate the influx of kittens and young adult cats into the system.

We can look to both international and Australian examples of how this can be achieved through working together with the community to desex, microchip and vaccinate community cats, and where possible adopt out sociable cats or where possible, support caretakers to become cat owners.

We have three robust Australian examples of how effective this approach can be:

- The [Banyule Desexing Program in Victoria](#) which demonstrated a remarkable two thirds reduction in intake, more than a 5 fold reduction in euthanasia, and improvements in relationships between animal management staff and community members, through targeted free desexing of cats from high intake areas.
- The [Community Cat Programs](#) led by the [Australian Pet Welfare Foundation](#) with the initial pilot area in the greater Ipswich area of Queensland, where microtargeting of cats from high intake properties reduced in cat intakes by council by 30-50% within one year.



- The RSPCA NSW '[Keeping Cats Safe at Home](#)' program in which RSPCA partners with councils to implement proactive and targeted desexing of cats cared for by local community members, using microtargeting to quickly reduce free-living cat populations.

Another approach to consider is the [Shelter-Neuter-Release \(SNR\) program delivered in the City of San Jose \(USA\)](#) (population 1.2 million). This program yielded a significant 27% decline in cat intake from fiscal year 2008-09 to 2013/14, incurring an annual cost of approximately \$560,000. In contrast, if a 27% reduction through lethal means were pursued, it would necessitate euthanising around 100,000 cats annually, amounting to approximately \$22.8 million in expenses.

We are aware of the opposition to this approach that is voiced by some members of the conservation sector. However, we maintain that as total eradication of free roaming cats is not practical or viable, having desexed populations is a better option than having free roaming cats that are capable of reproduction.

Similar to other proactive approaches to companion animal management, barriers to implementation of proactive programs for managing community cats at local council level appear to be mainly due to lack of funding and staff time. The proposed changes to legislation will only serve to worsen this situation.

The [Australian Cat Action Plan](#), developed by Getting 2 Zero, offers a pragmatic blueprint for Government and non-government entities alike to enhance domestic cat management and welfare, encompassing numerous strategies in alignment with recommendations. Additional recommended international resources for government animal management include [Managing Community Cats: A guide for Municipal leaders](#) and [Effective Animal](#)



Management for building humane communities, which provide valuable insights for navigating these challenges.

Replace 'trap and impound' as the default approach for urban cat management

Trapping is the current traditional action taken by the majority of Council AM and Pest Management Departments which has historically been done in the interests of public health and safety or conserving valued wildlife, but with a lack of knowledge of alternative effective strategies. However, there is no evidence that these interests are being protected, and that this traditional management strategy has any effect on the reduction of populations of free roaming cats. Trap and kill programs are ineffective in the long term, not cost-effective and unacceptable to a large proportion of people ([Benka et al 2022](#); [McCarthy et al 2013](#)).

AM Officers responding to complaints by the trapping cats and impounding of cats, enabling community members to hire traps and impound cats, and charging pound fees before reuniting cats is ad hoc management with no evidence of reduction in cat populations, impact of cats on the environment or reduction of cat related complaints ([Australian Pet Welfare Foundation, 2022](#)). It does not address the source of the problem, does not support the owner/caretaker to comply, and does not develop trust or community support to address free-roaming cat issues more broadly.

In addition, according to Hurley and Levy ([2022](#)), “untargeted removal of cats or other litter bearing mammals leads to a destabilisation of age and dominance structures, resulting in paradoxical increase in numbers as well as potential harms and impounding, caring for and potentially euthanizing free-roaming cats also diverts resources which could be invested more proactively.”



Considerable harm is being done to people by impounding and killing cats. Research on management programs of free-roaming cats has assumed that individuals value wildlife but do not value free-roaming cats (Thompson, 2022). This is not the case. Cat assistance teams in the community find that many people care about free-roaming cats and develop a strong bond with the cats they care for, and free desexing programs have a positive impact on the cat carers' well-being and quality of life (Crawford et al 2023). People feeding un/semi owned cats bond with the cats they care for – a bond which is nearly identical to the bonds pet owners have with their cats (Neal and Wolf, 2023).

Harm to free-roaming cats has a significant impact on people's mental health and well-being, both the people who own or feed them (Scotney et al 2023) and the people who care for these cats at pounds or shelters (Andrukonis et al 2020) who struggle to manage the cats' health and welfare until they find a caring home or are killed. Impounding free-roaming cats disproportionately impacts lower income families due to numerous barriers including cost, transportation, language. People earning less than \$30 000 have been shown to be one tenth as likely to find a lost cat as those who earn more than \$50 000 (Weiss et al 2012).

The core message to LG from State Government must shift from a focus on enforcement of existing (and proposed) regulatory tools being the primary or only role of Council AM teams, to more holistic, modern, and proactive approaches to companion animal management that improve human and animal welfare, as well as community amenity and safety.

G2Z proposes that descriptions of LG roles and responsibilities in animal management include an explicit acknowledgement of the shift in community expectation that these activities will be supportive and inclusive of human and animal welfare considerations, and that Local Councils devote resources to:



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- Proactive animal management practices, such as targeted desexing of cats, that reduce the demand on the system and support people and pets to stay together
- Ensuring high quality care and prioritising live outcomes of all pets who enter their care through animal management activities.

Recommendation 4: Improve collaboration and information sharing including data collection and availability

Collaboration

G2Z supports unified strategies by LG AM, animal welfare and sheltering organisations, human welfare organisations, conservationists and ecologists, and communities to achieve the best outcome for people, cats and wildlife.

G2Z strongly recommends that a South Australia Cat Management Working Group be developed with representatives from ALL stakeholder groups, with a focus on developing frameworks to guide stakeholder coalitions in local areas in collaborative, tailored cat management. G2Z would welcome continued involvement in this action.

G2Z strongly suggests that all contributions to cat management must be acknowledged and recognised, including the significant role that unfunded, volunteer-run rescue groups play in the capturing and/or rehoming of unowned and semi-owned cats currently.

A notable example of effective collaboration on domestic cat management in Australia, currently employed in the Ipswich community in Queensland, is the Cat Assistance Team (CAT). CAT consists of Animal Management Officers working with animal welfare organisation staff and volunteers to find undesexed roaming cats and providing no/low cost desexing and other support services targeted to low socio-economic areas with high cat intake ([Richardson, 2023 conference presentation](#)). This program has shown that providing no/low cost desexing and free microchipping, and other support (e.g., transport) ensures



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that people who are willing to take ownership of unowned adult cats and kittens of stray urban cats can do so more easily and will if afforded the opportunity. Other benefits of the CAT pilot program include active management of cats returned to their caregivers, to ensure they cause the least possible nuisance to the rest of the community and enlisting the help of caregivers to identify any newcomers and act quickly to trap and desex them. Improved relationships with the broader community also mean the CAT can provide assistance to develop cat safe fencing and deterrents, if necessary, to alleviate concerns from other community members. Many community members are environmentally aware and want to prevent unwanted cats and kittens, and protect wildlife ([Crawford et al., 2023](#)); Utilising their compassion to leverage practical assistance is a much quicker and more effective way of managing the local cat population.

There are opportunities to collaborate at various levels of government to maximise efficiency of funding. Federal and State Government funded human social services are also recognising that the people who need human welfare support also need support for animals they care for. G2Z strongly believes that animal support services should be built into human service providers' roles in partnership with Local Government and animal welfare organisations.

Data collection and availability

Evaluation of cat management strategies is essential in order to determine their effectiveness. Key evaluation measures and processes for data collection need to be agreed by all stakeholders and applied to all new and existing initiatives. There is an urgent need for standardisation and reporting of shelter/pound admission and outcomes data if they are to be accessible for evaluation purposes. Currently it appears that basic intake and outcomes data, let alone evaluation of different management strategies and programs, is either not undertaken, reported or not easily accessible.



G2Z recommends that regular, timely, publicly available, progress reports are included as part of a monitoring and reporting framework associated with any legislative changes. It is essential that the outcomes from this framework are as transparent and accessible as possible to ensure engagement, confidence, and the ability for continuous improvement from all stakeholders.

It is recommended that any government body considering implementing new cat management legislation (or amending current legislation), first implements a process to acquire the following information, before bringing the ruling into effect. It is also recommended that the same information is collected post-implementation for the purposes of monitoring and review.

Recommendation 5: Provision of desexing services and support

Veterinarians have an important role to play in intensive desexing support programs for domestic cats. G2Z supports desexing clinics to be funded in all areas to enable timely, no/low cost desexing, vaccinations and microchipping. These can be facilitated by organisations through community, shelter or private clinics, however the current veterinary shortage and lack of vets who are trained and confident performing High Quality High Volume Spay Neuter surgical techniques must be addressed. Veterinarians also need to be further encouraged to practise and promote pre-pubertal desexing (from 2- 4 months of age).

A broader discourse concerning increased access to veterinary services and the provision of desexing High-Quality, High-Volume Spay/Neuter services to local governments should be undertaken in collaboration with the veterinary sector, including universities and established shelter medicine teams capable of mentoring veterinarians in these practices.



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There is no evidence that supports the efficacy of the existing mandatory desexing legislation (MDL) as an effective cat management strategy on mainland Australia. The three Australian states with the highest per capita cat intake into shelters and pounds have mandated desexing ([Chua et al., 2023](#)) and a 2016 study of cat intake into RSPCA shelters around Australia also documented no benefit of mandated desexing in reducing cat populations within the community ([Alberthsen et al., 2016](#)).

Mandatory desexing policies are generally not viewed as being effective in achieving reductions of free roaming cat populations, complaints about wandering cats, intake to municipal or private animal shelters, or any other metric currently in use to assess the impact of cat management. There are a range of reasons why this might be the case:

- Majority of cats who are impounded do not have “owners” (as per the description of an owner in most legislation)
- Lack of support services provided alongside the implementation of the legislation to enable community members to comply with the policy i.e. low or no cost desexing services.
- MDL effectively criminalises cat caretakers that do not (or can not) comply with the legislation.
- MDL effectively criminalises those cats that are not complying with the legislation and classifies them as stray or feral with the more frequent outcome for them being euthanasia.
- MDL (without significant support mechanisms) is not equitable or inclusive and feeds into broader social issues of equity and human rights.

G2Z supports incentive programs for desexing and identification rather than mandatory requirements as this directly addresses the core barrier to wide scale uptake of companion cat desexing; that is, accessibility of veterinary services for people in low socioeconomic communities who are caring for the majority of urban stray cats. However, these must not



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be packaged with other legislative requirements as this prevents engagement with programs by cat caretakers. At present the vast majority of cats entering local government holding facilities and shelters are unowned urban stray cats (Marston et al., 2006; Alberthson, 2016; Chua, 2023),

Cat management actions based on imposing legislative requirements, and fining people for entire, unidentified or wandering cats are ineffective as they do not address the ecological niche in which these cats live; unowned urban stray cats live alongside community members and do not have owners. Punishing people for showing compassion to these cats by feeding or caring for them is both ineffectual and erodes community support for cat population management.

Due to the lack of publicly accessible intake data in South Australia it is not possible to determine if the MDL implemented in 2018 has had any effect on cat population or intake to facilities. Anecdotally, the Local Government and NFP personnel that we engage with on a regular basis report an increase in intake and requests for assistance and/or complaints related to cats. As far as we can determine, there is one NFP in South Australia dedicated to providing financial assistance for community members to desex cats, a handful LGs that provide discount desexing support to “eligible” (pension or health card holders) community members and two private vet clinics in the Adelaide area that provide meaningful discounts for the surgery. Clearly, the ability for the average cat caretaker to comply with the MDL is likely to be severely compromised on the basis of financial accessibility alone.

6. Consider the current adequacy, and future costs involved to cope with the proposed amendments:

The proposed legislative amendments will put significant financial pressure on South Australian Local Government departments and not for profits due to the current inadequacy of facility capacity, operational funding and the subsequent need to provide humane and



ethical outcomes for those cat's intake to the system. In addition, those cats being held in facilities across South Australia will face welfare challenges related to the provision of their physical and mental needs while impounded.

Addressing challenges faced by the cats in care necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the parameters constituting favourable welfare conditions for companion animals housed in such facilities. Key components encompass facility design, staffing levels, daily interactions and care protocols, length of stay, and healthcare provisions, all of which directly impact the physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being of the animals housed in the facility. The [Association of Shelter Veterinarians \(ASV\) Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animals Shelters](#) (the Guidelines) provide referenced, evidence-based recommendations for minimum and best practice short term (up to 14 days) care of animals in shelters, and these should be used to guide recommendations and standards of care for animals in SA holding facilities.

All of these issues need to be taken into account when considering the proposed changes in legislation. Compounding these challenges, anecdotal evidence suggests that most companion animal pound/shelter facilities in SA already operate substantially above their capacity for care.

The shift towards developing large 'warehouse style' municipal shelters serving multiple councils (often referred to as "super pounds"), particularly in lower socioeconomic communities for the sake of "economy of scale," raises concerns. Research by Andrews (Andrews, 2022) highlights key factors predicting live animal outcomes in shelters in the United States, including:

- Economic status of the community in which the shelter is located, with shelters located in communities experiencing poverty being less likely to achieve live outcomes;



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- Shelter size, with larger shelters less likely to achieve live outcomes than smaller shelters;
- Shelter type, with private organisations being slightly more likely to achieve live outcomes than comparable municipal shelters; and
- Existence of transport networks with shelters, who utilise transport to move animals to and from rehoming partners being more likely to achieve live outcomes.

It is noteworthy that anecdotally not-for-profit animal shelters and rescue organisations bear a significant burden in achieving live release outcomes for dogs and cats in SA.

7. Consider the funding and facilitation of a holistic approach to cat management

The ongoing challenge of funding animal management services has been a persistent topic within the broader local government sector. The concept of companion animal management as a 'user pays' service has been criticised for its flawed premise (e.g., [Pert, 2001](#)). As discussed earlier, there has been a rapid evolution in community expectations, viewing the treatment and future of animals as an integral part of Council's social services provision rather than merely animal welfare or management concerns. This transformation reflects the animals' place within families and the community, influencing Council's broader service delivery and public perception.

Rate payers are no longer satisfied with a “pound” only delivered from insufficient facilities. Accessibility to the facility, rehoming programs and standards of care for those animals housed are significant public issues that will only be exacerbated by the increase of intake of cats into the system. Showing compassion towards stray and surrendered cats (and dogs) by providing comfortable care and housing, vet treatment and desexing prior to adoption and minimising euthanasia of healthy animals, are expected by today's community. Transparent, collaborative efforts with the community to ensure high



rehoming rates and accessible desexing assistance have the potential to garner substantial support for achieving both animal management and welfare objectives.

‘Management’ is often a euphemism for euthanasia. The population of semi or unowned cats are mainly healthy and although may not be ideal for a ‘family cat’ situation, their behaviour is appropriate for their species, acceptable to their existing caregivers, and does not present a public health risk. Dale et al (2015) found that overall, the welfare status of managed un/semi-owned cats was relatively comparable to owned cats, with both groups having a slightly higher welfare status than unmanaged un/semi-owned cats, suggesting that human assistance benefits the welfare status of un/semi-owned cats.

Many un/semi owned cats have people that care about them (Neal and Wolf, 2023) and with assistance are willing to undertake the behaviours that AM Officers require (Rand and Lancaster, 2022) and so we already have the human assistance, referred to by Dale, that they need at our disposal. The barrier to achieving higher ownership rates for these cats is not that nobody wants to adopt them, but rather that current management actively separates the cats from the people most bonded to them.

Behaviour change

Language matters. Despite wide variation in how community members practically manage their pets, people view themselves as responsible owners (Westgarth et al 2019). This mismatch between the perception of individuals and regulators has implications for education and public messaging campaigns about “Responsible Pet Ownership”, resulting in lack of market penetration in target groups simply because people do not see the messaging as relevant to themselves.

It is also important to note here that education on its own is not an effective behaviour change strategy for community pet issues (Philpotts et al 2019). What we are really looking for is social change - the lasting transformation of human behaviour patterns and cultural



norms. Behaviour is a by-product of cultural norms which are themselves generated by peoples' values, beliefs, implicit biases and systemic issues such as public policy, infrastructure, racism, inequality, poverty etc. Cultural norms and behaviour patterns are often entrenched from years of habituation, and are not easy to shift, especially without having a good understanding of the root causes.

To address the limitations of traditional approaches to community education and compliance, modern behaviour change approaches are multi-faceted, using social marketing techniques ([David et al., 2019](#)), behavioural economics approaches such as 'nudging' (the facilitation of desired behaviours to make the performance of desired behaviours easier than non-desired behaviours) ([Forberger et al., 2020](#)), 'budging' (a version of nudging supported by regulation) ([Oliver, 2013](#)), and harnessing technology to interact with community members in a targeted and direct way ([Oxley et al., 2022](#)) or facilitate desired learning outcomes ([EUFIC 2014](#)). These combined approaches have been repeatedly shown to effectively shift social norms towards desired behaviours and increase the likelihood that individuals within a community will perform them.

The tools required to shift behaviours and create social change are generally; programs, services, messaging and products. The process of social change is: exposure to a message or idea delivered in an appropriate manner, a positive experience related to that messaging, transformation due to the experience and sharing of that experience and new information with the social group ([Chadwick, 2019](#)).

The role of regulatory enforcement is then to manage the behaviour of individuals who act outside of accepted social norms, leveraging social and material/financial motivations to improve compliance of the majority of the population ([Scalco et al 2017](#); [Mak et al 2019](#)), rather than relying on punishments as a motivator to perform desired behaviours.



[Glanville and colleagues \(2020\)](#) examined existing Australian behaviour change strategies aimed at improving pet keeping practices, and found several common limitations:

- Failure to accurately identify the target behaviours
- Failure to identify and apply a known behaviour change intervention
- Lack of information about the program and how it was delivered

It is important, particularly in reference to affordable desexing options, to make these available to ALL of the community, and to remove the requirement to essentially demonstrate how needy the individual is before they can access the program. All cats can breed no matter who they belong to, or what car they drive. Although targeting desexing efforts to areas of high intake and nuisance complaints is the priority, the fewer barriers that are in place for people to undertake the behaviours that the cat management community require, the better.

Most admissions of free-roaming cats to shelters and pounds are from low socio-economic areas ([Ma et al 2023](#)). Around 5% of impounded cats are reclaimed ([Lancaster et al 2015](#); [Chua et al 2023](#)). There are a number of reasons for this, but the primary reason is that these cats are not fully “owned” by one person and are cared for by multiple individuals within the community who each cannot afford to comply with legislative requirements.

Provide support for caretakers to be converted into owners

While ‘trap, desex, adopt’ approaches are a vital part of proactive cat management, the separation of cats from their human caretakers should only be performed where unavoidable, and while working with the caretaker to achieve mutually agreed goals (e.g. reduction in numbers of kittens at a site). Where the cats involved are under-socialised and unlikely to be rehomed successfully, priority should be given to supporting these cats in place, through desexing, microchipping, vaccination, and allowing the caretaker to take



ownership of all cats that fit this category even where numbers exceed Council pet limits, or containment legislation.

Trapping and impounding these cats leads to a loss of trust and engagement between council and their community. Alternatives to this must be considered where cat caretakers are not able to be recruited to become owners, even if they are temporary measures put in place to maintain or improve community relationships while more effective management initiatives are developed.

Alternatives may include suspension or removal of fines for non-compliance with existing mandatory requirements for cat owners (e.g. desexing), or desexing of cats without concurrent microchipping to an owner, in situations where carers of poorly socialised adult cats are known and identified but active participation in the program cannot be achieved with the resident. Their cats should be desexed and vaccinated in preference of leaving them sexually entire at the site or trapping and impounding them.

Well-managed community desexing programs in urban/peri-urban areas where there is no immediate threat to threatened native species, further enable communities to manage cats ethically and reduce their numbers over the long term. Desexing and returning cats to caretakers provides the opportunity for guidance to manage the cats in their care to ensure they cause the least possible nuisance to the rest of the community. The caretakers can identify any newcomers and take action to trap and desex them. Many community members are environmentally aware and want to prevent unwanted cats and kittens and protect wildlife ([Crawford et al 2023](#)). Utilising their compassion and providing support is a much quicker way of managing the local cat population. In areas of critical habitat, animal management, welfare and conservation organisations and local community members can work together to develop solutions appropriate for that community and environment.



Habitat restoration

Australian studies have shown that vegetation characteristics are likely more important for species diversity than the regulation of cats (Lilleth et al 2010; Franklin et al 2021) and that habitat destruction and degradation is the critical factor affecting richness of bird species (Grayson et al 2007). Therefore, G2Z recommends that AM departments collaborate with Local and State Government conservation and land management departments to concurrently promote and facilitate cat management and habitat restoration on private land. These efforts should focus on communities neighbouring environmentally sensitive areas, for example sensitive or important habitat on Crown land, to create ‘reduced cat impact’ buffer zones around and improve cat management in these areas.

Stakeholder support

Some Councils are recognising the importance of adequately funding animal welfare and sheltering organisations who currently do much of the work for Councils. This includes those organisations that take in stray and surrendered animals for the municipality into their own shelters, or by managing their impound and holding facilities. Helping with funding to support cat management activities performed by rescue groups, and to enable organisations to extend their services to prevent impoundment and reduce overpopulation is an important next step.

Recommendation 8. Revise proposed legislative amendments for efficacy and best practice

The proposed amendments include enabling trapping of stray cats in populated areas by local government and community members. Trapping and removing cats is currently the most common action taken by the majority of Council Animal Management and Pest Management Departments. Consistent trapping and killing of cats by Local Governments has been done over decades in the interests of public health and safety or conserving valued wildlife. Animal management officers responding to complaints by trapping and impounding of cats, enabling community members to hire traps to catch and impound cats,



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and charging reclaim fees before reuniting cats with their carers, is ad hoc management done because of a lack of knowledge and support for more effective, more cost-effective approaches to reducing cat populations.

Despite decades of wide scale use of this approach, there is no evidence that it has had any protective impact on public safety, amenity, or wildlife protection, nor that traditional trap and kill strategies reduce populations of free roaming cats. In addition, according to Hurley and Levy (2022), “*untargeted removal of cats or other litter-bearing mammals leads to a destabilisation of age and dominance structures, resulting in paradoxical increase in numbers as well as potential harms. Impounding, caring for and potentially euthanizing free-roaming cats also diverts resources which could be invested more proactively.*” In short, trapping and killing domestic cats does not address the source of the problem, does not support the owner/carer to comply, and does not develop trust or community support to address free-roaming cat issues more broadly.

Conclusion

The methods proposed for managing cats in the vicinity of humans (i.e. domestic cats (owned, semi-owned and unowned with individual cats often moving between these 3 categories), need to be in line with recent experiences with cat management programs in the community and developments in cat management and welfare in Australia and internationally.

An ethical approach to animal management involves supporting all stakeholders ([Verrinder & Phillips, 2022](#)), not only the native wildlife and non-pet owners, but also the cats and the people who care about them. Conservationists are seeing increasing impacts on wildlife populations and animal management and welfare and sheltering organisations are seeing the suffering of people and animals using current outdated animal management strategies ([Scotney et al., 2023](#)). Planning together to maximise positive outcomes for people, cats



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and wildlife is therefore imperative for an effective, economical, ethical and socially accepted South Australian cat management legislation.