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GETTING 2 ZERO SUBMISSION

NSW Legislative Council's Animal Welfare Committee

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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 in every community in Australia.

G2Z welcomes the opportunity to engage and advocate at all levels on topics relevant to or inclusive of companion animal management.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this vital discussion and welcome the chance to provide further insights on the recommendations detailed below.

G2Z supports evidence-based, collaborative solutions for lasting improvements in companion animal welfare and management.

Introduction

This submission focuses primarily on the Terms of Reference (a) through to (g), however, also includes some feedback on the other two Terms of Reference. As the Inquiry topic closely aligns with issues examined in the Draft Victorian Cat Management Strategy 2024 Consultation and the Draft Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats 2023 Consultation, G2Z recommends that this submission be read in conjunction with the detailed G2Z submissions for these consultations (attached).

Responses to Terms of Reference

(a) The impact of cats on threatened native animals in metropolitan and regional settings

G2Z acknowledges the negative impact that free roaming cats can have on wildlife populations that exist within the same ecosystems. G2Z also recognises that cats are an established species within Australia. 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,



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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.

As such, G2Z advocates for the use of collaborative, micro-targeted desexing as the core approach to driving down free roaming cat population numbers in areas of human habitation and minimising the negative impacts of free roaming cats on wildlife.

The reduction in population of free roaming cats, and in nuisance issues, are the essential issues for Local Government. Making gains in these areas 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. In addition, 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.

- (b) The effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers
- (e) Implications for local councils in implementing and enforcing cat containment policies
- (g) The impact of potential cat containment measures on the pound system
- (h) The outcomes of similar policies on cat containment in other Australian states or territories

G2Z strongly supports containment on owner's property where possible but does not support making cat containment a mandatory requirement for cat ownership as this presents a barrier to cat caretakers transitioning to cat owners, which reduces participation in cat desexing programs; this is contrary to the goal of desexing as many cats as possible. There is no evidence that supports the efficacy of mandatory containment legislation or cat curfews, as an effective cat management strategy (RSPCA Australia, 2018).



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Australian Councils who have implemented mandatory 24/7 containment of cats have reported an increase in cat related complaints, impoundments and euthanasia, and have been unable to demonstrate a reduction in cats wandering at large (RSPCA Australia, 2018). 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 multiple 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.

Mandatory containment policies are generally not viewed as being effective in achieving an improvement in reduction of free roaming cat populations, complaints about wandering cats, reduction in intake to municipal or private animal shelters, or any other metric currently in use. The main reasons reported for this are:

- Majority of cats who are impounded do not have “owners” (as per the description of an owner in most legislation) and therefore there is no one to contain them.
- Lack of support services provided alongside the implementation of the legislation to enable community members to comply with the policy i.e. financial and practical support to develop cat containment infrastructure.
- Mandatory containment policies effectively criminalise cat caretakers that do not (or cannot) comply with the legislation.
- Mandatory containment policies effectively criminalise 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.
- Mandatory containment policies (without significant support mechanisms) are not equitable or inclusive and feeds into broader social issues of equity and human rights.

c) Welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions

d) The effectiveness of community education programs and responsible pet ownership initiatives

G2Z has discussed best practice promotion and behaviour change approach to encouraging improved feline welfare and cat keeping practices, in the section “Theme 1: Promote cat welfare and responsible cat ownership” in our submission to the Draft Victorian Cat Management Strategy 2024 Consultation. The following information is restricted to the key points and should be read in conjunction with the more complete discussion in the VCMS 2024 Consultation submission, attached.



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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).

G2Z recommends a shift away from traditional ‘education and enforcement’ models in the management of pet animals, including domestic cats, towards proven behaviour approaches promoting cat welfare and desired or positive cat care behaviours, such as the ‘Ten Task’ model proposed by Glanville et al ([2020](#)).

G2Z suggests the following themes be considered for community engagement material to increase the performance of desired cat caring behaviours and improve cat welfare:

- 1) In order to achieve optimal welfare, environments provided by cat caretakers must meet the ‘[Five Pillars of a Healthy Feline Environment](#)’. These are:
 - a. Pillar 1 – Provide a safe place
 - b. Pillar 2 – Provide multiple and separated key environmental resources
 - c. Pillar 3 – Provide opportunity for play and predatory behaviour
 - d. Pillar 4 – Provide positive, consistent and predictable human–cat social interaction
 - e. Pillar 5 – Provide an environment that respects the importance of the cat’s sense of smell
- 2) Content to help individual cat carers identify when total confinement and maintaining acceptable cat welfare are mutually exclusive, as the individual cat does not thrive when contained. In these situations, owners must be supported to make balanced, considerate decisions about their keeping practices.
- 3) “Desexed cats make great neighbours”. Cat desexing reduces ‘nuisance’ behaviours (fighting, breeding, spraying and vocalisations) and associated complaints from neighbours and other community members, and improves cat health.

e) The effectiveness and benefits to implementing large scale cat desexing programs

G2Z included a detailed discussion of cat desexing programs as a core component of domestic cat management in the section “Theme 2: Increase cat desexing rates” of our submission to the Draft Victorian Cat Management Strategy 2024 Consultation. The following information is restricted to the key points and should be read in conjunction with the more complete discussion in the VCMS 2024 Consultation



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submission,

attached.

In Australia, we have a growing body of evidence showing that collaborative, targeted cat desexing programs in which local authorities, local animal welfare organisations and members of the community invested in cat wellbeing work together to identify and desex free-living cats, and recruit their current caretakers to become full, legal owners of these cats, are the cheapest, quickest and more effective way to achieve control of local breeding populations of domestic cats. Successful examples of this approach include, but are not limited to:

- The City of Banyule targeted cat desexing program in Victoria, which demonstrated city-wide decreases in cat impoundments by 66%, cat euthanasia by 82%, and cat-related calls by 36% over 8 years, with savings to council of AU \$440,660 for an outlay of AU \$77,490 ([Cotterell et al., 2024](#))
- [RSPCA NSW Keeping Cats Safe at Home](#) project, which combines behaviour change strategies aimed at improving cat caring and keeping practices with targeted cat desexing. This program has demonstrated successful results across 11 councils in a variety of community types from rural to inner suburban.
- The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation Community Cat Programs in the municipality of Ipswich, that has [demonstrated consistent reductions in cat intakes, nuisance calls and euthanasia through targeted, free cat desexing across three primary target areas in Queensland](#).

Additionally, there is a wealth of published research demonstrating that non-lethal management approaches based on desexing, adoption of socialised cats, and leaving unsocialised desexed strays in their home location, have led to significant reductions in urban stray cat populations internationally (Levy et al., 2014; Nutter 2005; Spehar & Wolf 2018; Spehar & Wolf 2019; Zito et al., 2018), and in Australia (Swarbrick & Rand 2018; Tan et al., 2017).

Importantly, to be effective in the long term, this approach must replace 'trap and kill' cat management as the default domestic cat management practice, with trapping and removal of cats from communities used only when necessary, with the consensus of the community that this is required or desirable in specific circumstances.

(i) Options for reducing the feral cat population

G2Z included a detailed discussion of the factors impacting management of feral domestic cats in natural areas adjacent to human populations in the submission to the Draft Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats 2023. The following information is restricted to the key points and should be read in



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conjunction with the more complete discussion in the submission, attached.

Domestic cat management policies and actions must reiterate a clear definition of feral cats and distinguish between cats who are genuinely unowned, unsocialised, and have no relationship with or dependence on humans, and domestic cats who are physically present on public land at the time of cat control activities. 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. Local Government Animal Management 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 strongly supports the formation and use of “stakeholder coalitions” for each community/municipality, and at state level, to maximise cooperation, collaboration, resourcing, information sharing and the improvement of relationships between government and non-government service providers is recommended.

State provision of the following services to stakeholders would be of great benefit:

- Access to a reference library of accurate, evidence-based reference materials and resources, and associated continuing education opportunities for development of evidence-based, progressive cat management service
- Access to, with the requirement to use, shelter management software with the capability to produce compliant reporting for animal services and outcomes.
- In-depth training on data management, cat management methodology and issues, and community engagement

(j) Any other related matters.

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



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report (Identifying best practice domestic cat management in Australia – May 2018).

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



Recognise the role of volunteer-run animal rescue and rehoming groups in domestic cat management

G2Z suggests that the role of volunteer-run rescue groups in urban cat management be more explicitly recognised in discussions about domestic cat management in urban and suburban contexts.

Lack of recognition of the current contribution of Volunteer-run rescue groups in the management of domestic cats is detrimental to relationships within the sector. These groups are not shelters and the work they do is often not in collaboration with councils for a variety of reasons. Where groups are working with councils, they commonly take on care and rehoming responsibility for animals taken into care by councils, at their own cost, with no financial or other practical contribution from Councils. G2Z encourages Local Government to, at the very least, actively participate in and support provision of positive outcomes for the cats that come into their care. Ideally, municipal shelters should be facilitating direct rehoming (amongst other proactive programs such as foster, intake reduction etc.) of the community's pets that require the shelters' services.

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