



Expanding NDN Co-operative Desexing Programs with Councils

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INTRODUCTION

Thirteen years after the first G2Z Summit, abandoned and unwanted cats and cat euthanasia rates are still a significant community concern around Australia. A recent study of Victoria, where the State Govt requires Councils to report statistics, indicated that, on average, 50% of cats are still being euthanased in pounds and shelters, and euthanasia rates for cats are up to four times that of dogs in many places. In some states, for many years Councils have largely ignored cats, leaving the burden of managing a constantly growing number of unwanted cats to animal welfare groups whose staff and volunteers have struggled to cope with the onslaught.

However, in Gold Coast City, with over half a million people, AWLQ has reduced the cat euthanasia rate for the whole city from 50% in 2001/2 (2000 cats euthanized) to 7% in 2017/18 (136 cats euthanized).

A range of strategies has been used to achieve this sustained reduction, summarised in the Getting to Zero model <http://www.g2z.org.au/pdf/G2Z%20Brochure%200912.pdf>. One of the most important strategies has been ongoing availability of low cost desexing **to prevent unwanted animals**, rather than Council having to Collect/Hold/Euthanize or Rehome, the traditional strategy which is expensive and fails to sustainably reduce incoming numbers. The availability of low cost desexing through AWLQ Community Veterinary Clinics has been significant with rates over the last few years for pension/concession card holders of \$54 for a male cat desexing and \$72 for a female cat desexing, and dog desexing from \$108 - \$174 depending on size and gender. For the general public, desexing prices have been \$90 for male and \$120 for female cats. However, the Community Vet Clinic is often booked out, and so participation of other local veterinary clinics is invaluable. As well, most cities/towns do not have a Community Vet Clinic.

This paper focuses on the expansion of NDN Cooperative Desexing Programs with standardised prices for owners, vets and Councils. The program has been designed to be effective, sustainable and fair. It can be expanded to utilise the support of semi-owners and community members who want to prevent breeding of unowned cats without the more aggressive strategy of trapping and killing, which is harmful for people and cats, and has not been effective in reducing numbers sufficiently to prevent abandonment or high euthanasia rates. This paper also covers the benefits to veterinarians, and how easy it is for Councils Animal Management Departments to start this program – all the work is done for them. Its relevance to dogs is also discussed.

EXPANDING NDN COOPERATIVE DESEXING PROGRAMS

Initially the program was offered in Gold Coast City to complement a breeder permit requirement that all kittens be desexed prior to sale or transfer. At time of writing this, 11 Councils are participating in the program (Brisbane, Gold Coast City, Ipswich, Scenic Rim, Lockyer Valley, Fraser Coast, Central Highlands, and Banana Council in Qld; Camden and Campbelltown Councils in NSW; and Whyalla in SA). Participating Councils allocate a set amount of their Animal Management budget for this program each year ranging from \$5000 for a very small Council to \$57 000 for a large Council. A further 16 Councils have expressed interest in the program.

Most Councils are focussing on cats. However Central Highlands Council has included dogs, due to large numbers of rural dogs breeding and roaming. Initially it was thought that residents may not be willing to pay anything toward desexing. However, enthusiasm for the program was huge, with desexing vouchers to the value of \$10 000 being issued in the first six days of the program.

WHY NDN COOPERATIVE DESEXING PROGRAMS ARE EFFECTIVE, SUSTAINABLE AND FAIR

Councils are increasingly interested in offering support for desexing, but funding arrangements vary greatly. Some Councils offer a fixed sum to residents for one or two cats. Others contribute to animal welfare organisations' programs which promote desexing for one or two months for the year. Some programs do not offer sufficient subsidies to make desexing affordable for low income earners who need it most. They may rely totally on the

veterinary profession to reduce their prices by a standard percentage of say 20% which on a charge of \$250 to \$300, can still be unaffordable for residents on low incomes.

NDN Cooperative Desexing Programs are fair to all stakeholders affected by unwanted cats i.e. owners, vets, and Councils and their communities (which include both animal lovers and people who find cats a nuisance, or worry about their wildlife impact):

- Prices are low enough for people on low incomes (pension concession card holders, or people on low wages e.g. single parents, parents on single low incomes etc), people with too many cats and people wanting to adopt unowned stray cats. Compassion for the many cats needing homes, or the need the companionship, often lead people to take on more cats than they really want. While they cannot afford a large sum of up to \$350 for a female cat desexing, they can usually afford to contribute around \$50 - \$60 to desexing costs out of their pension or low salary, as well as provide food, warmth and shelter for a cat. This means these cats can remain in a caring home, and not cost the community approximately \$250 per cat to collect, hold and kill or \$400 net each, on average, to desex and care for until they can be rehomed.
- Vets have all their costs covered e.g. wages of vet, vet nurse, and receptionist, as well as all materials. They benefit from having fewer unwanted kittens to treat free of charge or to euthanize.
- Councils get good value for their funding, as owners/carers are contributing, vets are providing a fixed reduced price as a community service. It is approximately \$145 cheaper to desex a cat and prevent a litter of unwanted kittens, than to have to collect, hold and kill or rehome a cat once it is born.
- It is effective in that the Council funding goes directly to those who most need a subsidy.
- It is sustainable because the funding is not wasted on those who can afford it and Councils do not need to develop, train and manage staff to run the program. Due to the additional costs with an increasing number of Councils interested in the program, an administration fee is now being charged per Council to pay a fraction of the cost to run the program.
- The program is justifiable to people who care about cats, non-cat owners and wildlife enthusiasts as it is more efficient, less expensive and less harmful to prevent unwanted cats through desexing, than try to catch and kill them after they are born.

BENEFITS of CO-OPERATIVE CAT DESEXING PROGRAMS TO COUNCILS AND COMMUNITIES

1. Reduced costs for Council Animal Management Departments

Here's an example: In Gold Coast City, the cost of collection of an abandoned cat or dog, holding the animal for an average of four days and euthanasing the animal is on average **\$220, and \$260 for a litter** collected and housed together, then euthanized. The statutory holding period is up to 14 days in other Australian states, which can add another \$200 to the cost i.e. total cost of approximately **\$420 per animal or \$480 for a litter**. The **cost is even greater** if these unwanted cats and kittens are desexed, microchipped, vaccinated, wormed, flea-treated and cared for **until rehomed, at an average net cost of additional \$400**, after adoption fees paid by the new owner.

In contrast, the cost to Gold Coast City Council of a Co-operative Cat Desexing Program, working with local private practice veterinarians and the Animal Welfare League of Qld (AWLQ), is on average **\$75 per cat**. The savings from funding this desexing cost rather than the costs of collecting, holding and euthanizing the progeny of the undesexed cat are presented in Table 1. These calculations are conservative, as they do not account for these unwanted cats having their own litters, so that the number of animals to be collected, and the associated costs, grows exponentially.

Table 1 COSTS & SAVINGS BY FUNDING DEXEXING SUBSIDIES

Cat management strategies	COST Collect/Hold/Euthanase one cat	COST Collect /Hold/ Rehome one cat	COST Council Desexing Subsidy (average) One cat	SAVINGS by preventing one unwanted cat, instead of euthanasing	SAVINGS by preventing one unwanted cat, instead of rehoming	Savings by desexing 300 cats (cost \$18 000), instead of euthanasing *	Savings by desexing 300 cats (cost \$18 000), instead of rehoming *
COSTS/SAVINGS held average 4 days	\$220	\$620	\$75	\$145	\$545	\$43 500	\$163 500
COSTS held 14 days (on average)	\$420	\$820	\$75	\$345	\$745	\$103 500	\$223 500

*These savings increase exponentially as for each prevented litter, thousands more kittens who would have been produced by this litter are also prevented.

2. Addresses the source of the problem

Data on source of surrendered (i.e. owned) cats of for the whole of Gold Coast City has shown that the greatest source of surrendered cats (one quarter) is owners' unwanted litters. In addition, the majority of strays in pounds and shelters are sociable with humans and therefore are most probably currently owned and not properly contained to their property, or have been owned.

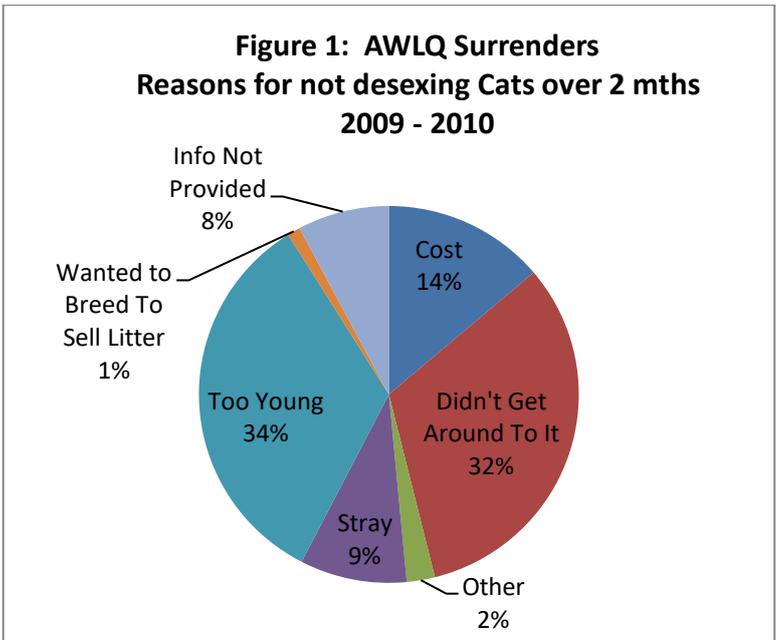
While most owned cats will be desexed, some have an "accidental" litter before they are desexed (22% of female cats in a 2014 South Australian Dog and Cat Management Board-commissioned study had an unplanned litter¹). Possible causes for this include:

- a. Most owners (72% in the 2014 SA study¹) are unaware that cats can be pregnant from 4 months of age, and
- b. Two thirds of veterinary practices are not promoting the safety and benefits of desexing cats from 2-3 months of age (based on data collected by AWLQ from all veterinary clinics in Gold Coast City in 2010/11).

The South Australian Dog and Cat Management Board study found the following reasons for not desexing:

Reason for not desexing	%
Too young	41%
Cost of desexing procedure	25%
Want to breed	20%
Too old	2%
Other	12%
Total	100%

By offering and promoting desexing subsidies to people in financial need, the whole community becomes more aware of the importance of desexing, and the need for early age desexing. On the Gold Coast one third of surrendered undesexed cats of desexing age (from 2 months) were not desexed because their owner didn't get around to it, one third because owners thought their cat was too young, and 14% due to cost of desexing (**Figure 1**). **Promotion of low cost desexing prior to 4 months of age helps to address these main reasons for not desexing.**



3. Long term reduction in incoming and euthanized kittens and cats

The long-term effect for Councils of investing in desexing over many years, rather than catch/hold/euthanize, is a decrease in the number of kittens being impounded and euthanized.

Figure 2 shows a reduction in all incoming stray and surrendered kitten numbers in Gold Coast City up to 2017/18.

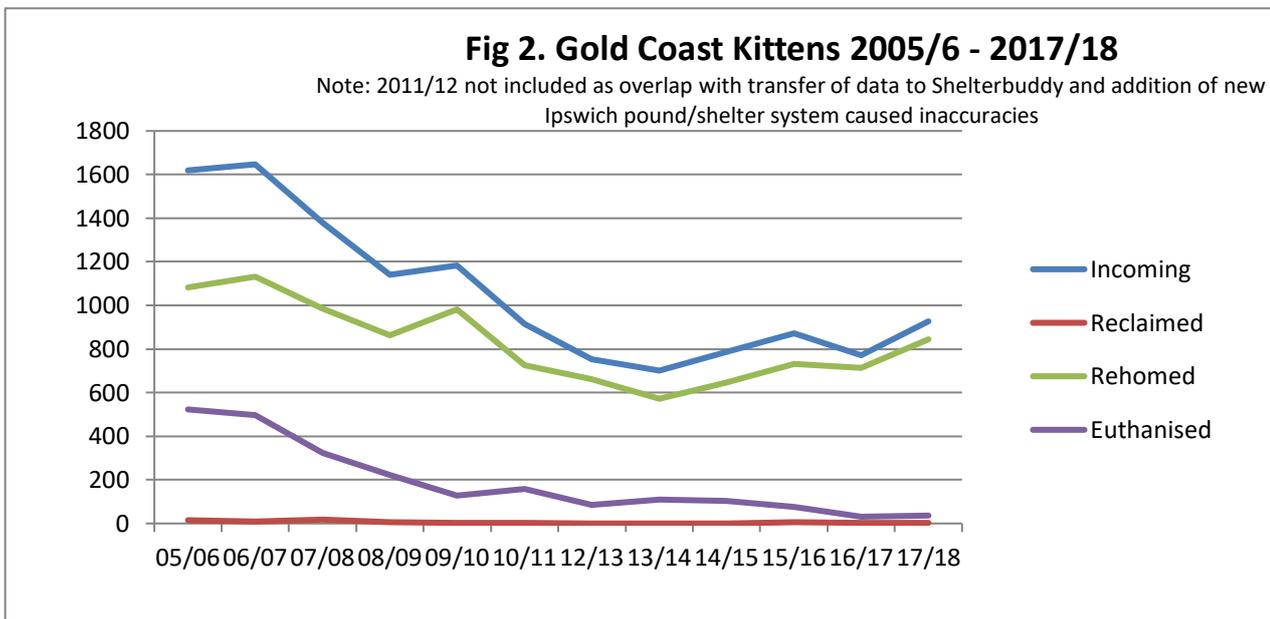
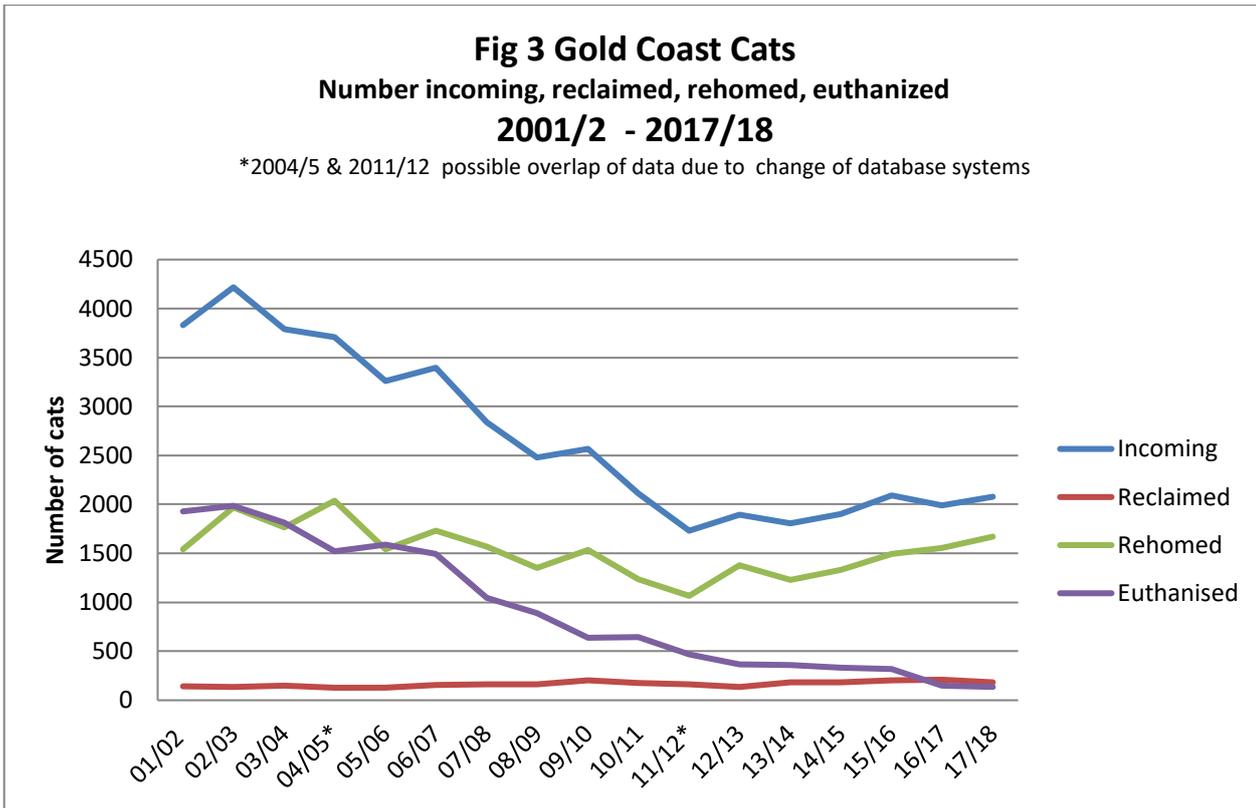


Figure 3 shows the reduction in incoming and euthanized Gold Coast cats between 2001/2 and 2017/18.

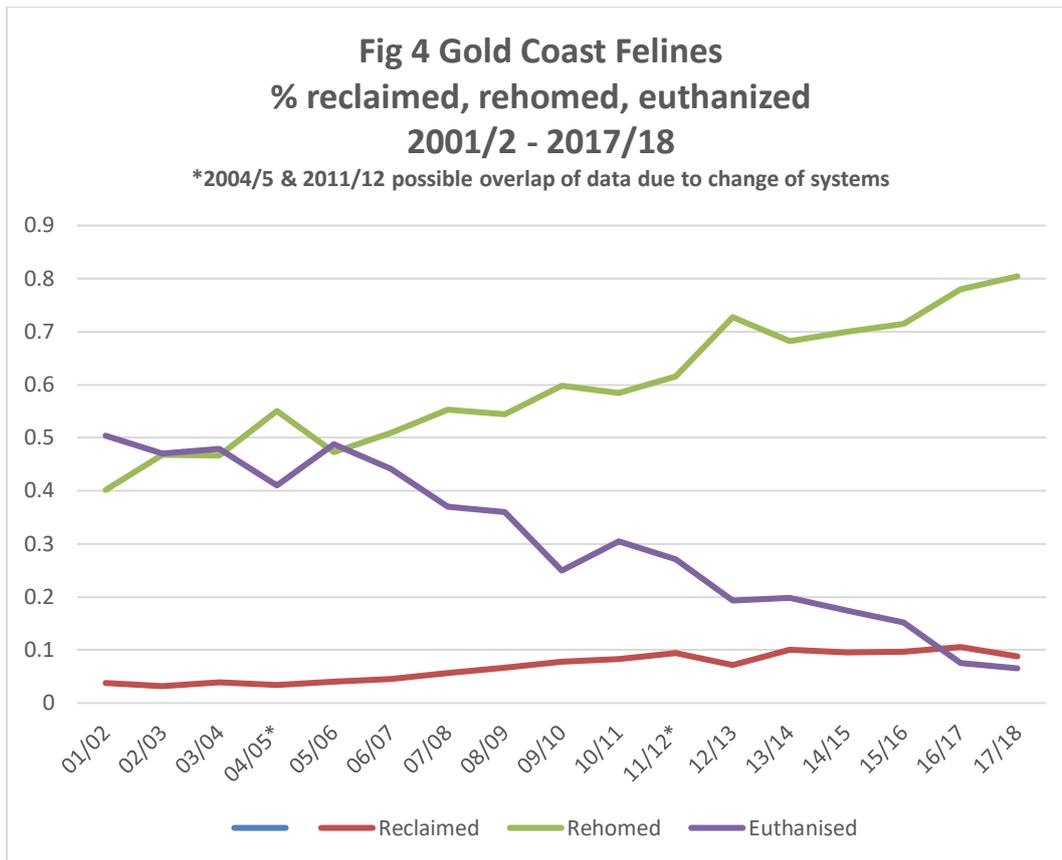


4. Prevention of unsocialised unowned cat colonies

A 2014 report for the SA Dog and Cat Management Board showed that 46% of owned cats were not contained to their property at all times.¹ As only 47% of owned cats were desexed at 3-6 months,¹ and cats can be pregnant from 4 months of age, many wandering owned cats can breed to contribute to the unowned cat population. Council desexing programs of owned animals therefore help to limit colonies of unowned cat populations in cities and towns, which are difficult and costly to control.

5. Meeting community expectations

As most Animal Management Departments know, communities are increasingly aware of, and disapprove of, the euthanasia of impounded healthy and treatable cats and dogs. Communities also appreciate any reduction in nuisance issues from unwanted animals. **Figure 4** shows how a community can change from higher proportions of euthanized than rehomed animals to the reverse.



6. **Increased microchipping and registration compliance.** Where cats are required to be registered with a reduced registration fee for a desexed animal, people on low incomes often cannot afford to get their cat desexed to access the more affordable cheaper registration rates. Thus, neither registration nor desexing is done. A Cooperative Desexing Program enables low income earners to not only desex their cat but afford to register their cats by making the cheaper rate accessible. Microchipping can also be offered at reduced rates while an animal is being desexed under a subsidised scheme, as there are no additional labour expenses incurred by veterinarians. Free registration and microchipping for the first year at the time of desexing can also be offered as an incentive by Councils, to save having to impound/euthanize or rehome these cats if they wander in the future.
7. **Increased compliance with breeder permit and desexing legislation.** Increasingly, Councils and state governments are now requiring all cats to be desexed, or kittens to be desexed prior to sale or transfer by the breeder <http://www.g2z.org.au/recommended-legislation.html>. **To enable compliance for owners on low incomes, subsidised desexing needs to be offered by Councils.**
8. **Reduced stress and impacts on mental health of vets, animal management and shelter staff.** Many shelter workers directly involved with euthanasia develop serious mental health problems including post-traumatic stress leading to depression, substance abuse, high blood pressure and in some cases suicide. Offering desexing support means fewer unwanted litters of kittens, reduced killing and eventually Getting to Zero killing of healthy and treatable animals. This also leads to reduced concerns in the wider community who support positive prevention strategies.

BENEFITS of CO-OPERATIVE DESEXING PROGRAMS TO VETERINARIANS

- a. Co-operative Desexing Programs help end the killing of healthy and treatable cats and dogs which many veterinarians are faced with in their own practices, and in pounds and shelters.

The Queensland AVA President, Dr Tony Thelander, noted in his Report on the 4th National G2Z Summit to End Companion Animal Overpopulation² that:

“All stakeholders involved with G2Z (including the veterinary profession) have a genuine desire to end the annual carnage of unwanted companion animals at refuges. ... The most successful and common model at the Summit ... is the collaboration between welfare agencies, the local council and the local veterinary practices. Where the three groups are committed, resourced and co-operating, the unwanted animal numbers in these communities are drastically falling. Obviously a more coordinated approach (between welfare agencies, councils and the veterinary profession) would save resources and better target the problem.”

- b. Low cost spay/neuter programs are effective in raising total community spay/neuter levels (i.e. they do not merely cause substitution in sources of spay/neuter procedures).^{3(p.740)} The effects of growth in discount spay/neuter on regular spay/neuter procedures for both cats and dogs are positive, to a highly significant degree. This means that discount desexing and regular desexing procedures “complement each other, rather than crowding each other out”.^{3(p.744)} This positive relationship is understandable if marketing of the discount desexing sells the benefits such as “reduced risk of health problems, reduction in behavioural problems such as aggression, elimination of the possibility of a ‘surprise’ litter, and the social benefits (or ‘warm glow’ benefit) of helping to address animal overpopulation”.^{3(p.744)} The marketing “can also address misconceptions people commonly have regarding the risks or downsides of the spay/neuter procedure”, and “exert social pressure that spay/neuter is the socially proper thing to do”.^{3(p.745)}
- c. Veterinarians can meet new clients and offer other services and products at the time of the surgery or in future appointments. One private practice vet clinic which participated in the first cooperative desexing program available to all cat owners on the Gold Coast recorded that of the 88 bookings for the Desexing Month, 83% were new clients and 60% of the clients had additional services e.g. vaccinations, microchip. Having an ongoing subsidy to offer to owners in financial need means additional business which can be scheduled in slower times, as these owners are not likely to be able to, or consider they can, afford the service otherwise.
- d. **In the long term, the number of unplanned animals given away to people who may be ill-equipped to care for or afford veterinary treatment for their animals will be reduced. This means more responsible ownership, less pressure on veterinarians to provide free services, and fewer distressing euthanasias of unwanted pets.**

HOW THE NDN CO-OPERATIVE CAT DESEXING PROGRAM WORKS

1. **Councils fund an annual amount e.g. \$5 000 to \$60 000, to subsidise desexing costs for cat owners in need** i.e.
 - holders of pension, concession or health care cards
 - people on low incomes
 - people with large numbers of cats

Budget depends on size of the Council, the need and how quickly Council want to resolve the issue of unwanted cats.

Council funds used proactively on desexing over a number of years, along with other G2Z strategies have been shown to reduce the number of abandoned cats and dogs in pounds and shelters.

2. **Costs are shared between owners, Council, veterinarians and NDN.** Prices are kept low enough to allow owners on a pension or low income to contribute, while minimising costs of managing unwanted animals for Councils, and covering veterinary costs. **The program is managed for Councils by the National Desexing Network’s (NDN) experienced team.** Councils are charged a small administration fee of 17% of budgeted amount, to help with the costs of

staffing to establish, promote and manage the program. AWLQ's NDN will continue to support the prevention of unwanted animals in Australia by paying more than half the costs.

3. Desexing payments

CATS	Owner pays	Council Subsidy	Vet receives*
Male cat castration	\$55	\$45	\$100
Female cat spey (first cat)	\$65	\$85	\$150
Female cat spey (additional cats in same household)	\$50	\$100	\$150

**This covers wages of vets, vet nurses and receptionists, as well as all material costs. These prices have been introduced for the 2019/20 year and will be reviewed and adjusted every few years, as needed.*

4. Participating vets: NDN contacts all vets in the local area and invites them to participate.

To ensure that low income earners can participate, the following consistent conditions across all participating vet clinics are required:

- a. 24-hour pain relief included at no extra cost
- b. no requirement to vaccinate before desexing. Vet clinics may choose to allocate a particular day for desexing and/or a section of the clinic if they are concerned about having unvaccinated animals in their clinic.
- c. If animals are **pregnant or in season**, owners are not to be asked for additional payment. Instead **vets can claim an additional standard rate of \$55 from the Council Desex Fund.**

5. Duration: The program runs all year round – this is vital due to the long breeding season of cats in Australia.

6. Promotion: The program is heavily promoted at the start, and whenever needed, to encourage community awareness and ensure it is well-used. A key time to promote is in low breeding season in July in conjunction with NDN's National Desexing Month to minimise the number of pregnant and in-season cats needing to be desexed which is more stressful for the cats, more time-consuming for vets and more costly.

Key messages:

- Cats can be pregnant by 4 months of age
- It is just as safe to desex kittens from 2-4 months of age and from 1 kg in weight
- Too many kittens, not enough homes
- Prevent an unwanted litter – desex now before the spring breeding season
- Desexed animals are less likely to wander looking for a mate, to mark their territory by spraying, or to be aggressive
- Your pet does NOT have to have a litter before its desexed
- Desexed pets are safer and healthier

The National Desexing Network www.ndn.org.au provides fliers customised for each Council, and a media release to help promote each Council's NDN Cooperative Desexing Program, and free posters and media in National Desexing Month in July.

STEP BY STEP PROCEDURE FOR ORGANISING A COOPERATIVE DESEXING PROGRAM

The National Desexing Network (NDN) experienced team will set up the program in your city/shire, as follows:

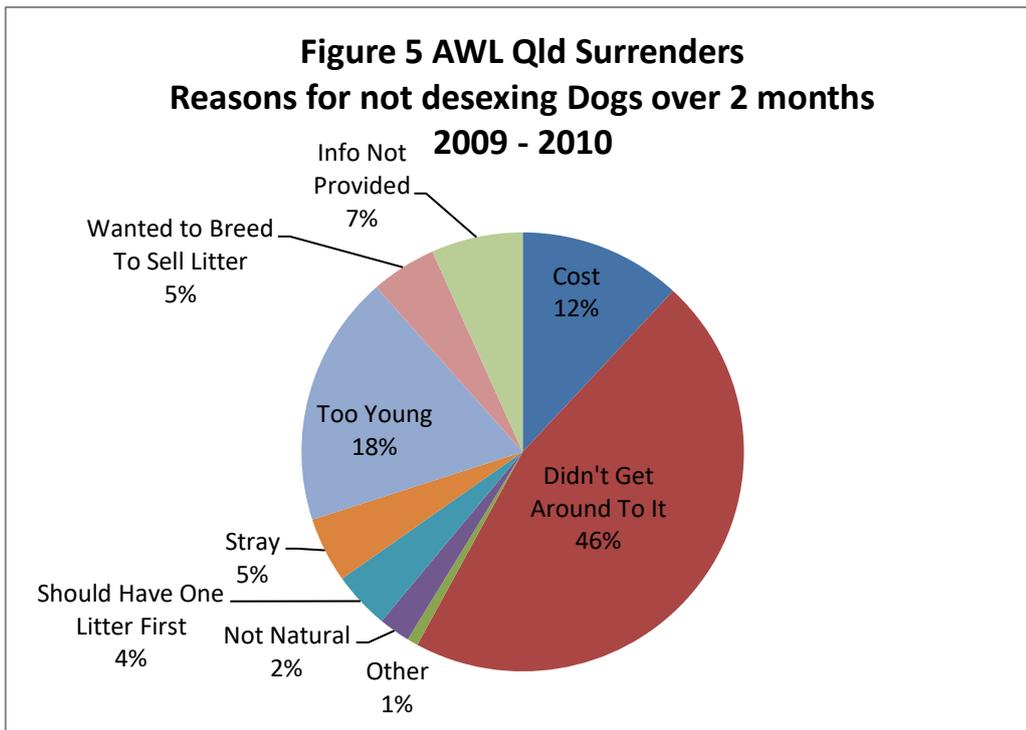
- (i) Council budgets a set amount annually.
- (ii) NDN invites local veterinary clinics to participate.
- (iii) NDN organises vouchers and claim forms, and Council transfers annual budgeted amount to NDN for monthly reimbursement of participating vets.
- (iv) NDN organises a Community Awareness Campaign in conjunction with Council's Animal Management Coordinator and Media staff.
- (v) Cat owners phone NDN to determine eligibility based on pension, concession, health care card, low income, and/or large numbers of cats. If eligible, they are given a choice of participating vets near them.
- (vi) NDN sends numbered vouchers which include name and contact details of their chosen participating vet, and instructions. Vouchers have an expiry date of one month.
- (vii) Cat owners make the appointment as normal, pay their \$55 or \$65 and hand their voucher to the vet clinic on the day of the desexing.
- (i) NDN sends claim forms to participating vet clinics to return with redeemed vouchers at the end of each month.
- (i) NDN checks claim forms and vouchers and reimburses veterinarians from Council funds.
- (i) Data on numbers desexed and funds spent is provided to Councils as needed.
- (i) NDN organises further promotion via social media etc until all funding has been used.
- (i) Councils are encouraged to keep annual records of incoming stray and surrendered kittens (up to 6 months of age) and incoming stray and surrendered cats (6 months and over) along with reclaimed, rehomed and euthanized numbers to demonstrate if the program is having an effect in reducing numbers of unwanted kittens and cats over a number of years.
- (i) Because of the fast breeding rate of cats, it is important to continue this funding each year to prevent escalation of numbers.

COOPERATIVE DESEXING PROGRAMS AND OTHER STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING IMPOUNDED DOGS

Councils need to analyse their data to decide if desexing programs need to be applied to dogs as well as cats. There is usually a more pressing need, in most communities with limited funding, to apply desexing programs to cats more than dogs due to:

- longer and more prolific breeding rate of cats
- double or triple euthanasia rates of cats
- a greater proportion of kittens than puppies incoming as unwanted litters. There is usually a kitten “tsunami”, not an oversupply of puppies in pounds and shelters.

However, desexing contributes to easier management of dogs, being less likely to roam looking for a mate, fight and produce unwanted litters that may be neglected, untrained and wandering.



Owners indicate the main reasons for not desexing dogs are not getting around to it, their dog was too young or the cost (Figure 5). Including dogs in your Council NDN Cooperative Desexing Program to encourage desexing by those who don't get around to it, before breeding age, and targeting low income earners, will help to reduce issues with stray and abandoned dogs.

Other Proactive Strategies to Prevent Unwanted Adult Dogs

Preventing Stray Dogs

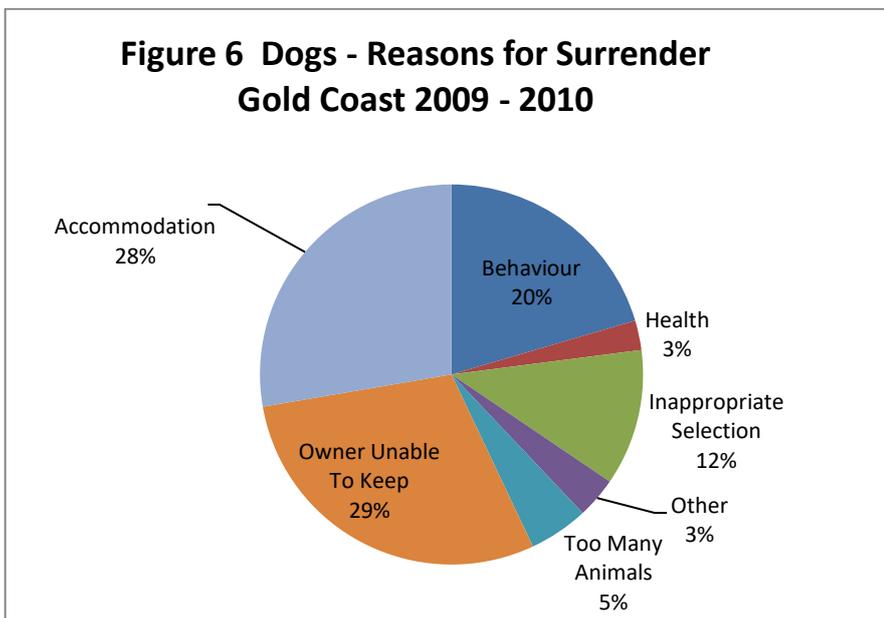
- Have a proactive friendly presence in areas with the most animal management issues to provide information and support to access desexing subsidies, training, enrichment and containment. Encourage and support residents to address issues before problems develop. See Todd Stosuy's presentation *Proactive Community Animal Control* <http://www.g2z.org.au/6th-national-g2z-summit-2015.html>
- Return straying animals home whenever possible, with support to fix the problem, instead of impounding
- Waive impounding fees initially, if owners address desexing, yard containment issues and enrichment
- Waive or reduce impound fees if owners take advantage of subsidised desexing for impounded dogs, prior to release
- Enable reclaim of impounded animals by offering payment plans, and include desexing for low income earners

Preventing Surrendered Dogs

Gather data on the main reasons for surrendered dogs in your city/shire. For example in City of Gold Coast, while the main reasons for surrendered cats is too many animals, requiring the strategy of desexing, the main reasons for surrendered dogs (**Figure 6**) are:

- a. accommodation issues
- b. owner unable to keep for reasons such as ill-health or death of owner, relationship breakup, domestic violence, not enough time, new baby.
- c. owner unable to manage or overcome behavioural issues
- d. inappropriate selection

The main reasons may be different in your city/shire.



While it is difficult to prevent owners' changes in circumstances, **addressing the other three main causes** will reduce intake by up to 60%:

1. Accommodation issues: Provide information to pet owners on support available and how to lodge a dispute with the Commissioner for Body Corporate and Community Management, if the body corporate is unreasonable in their restrictions on pets e.g. <http://www.awlqld.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Pet-friendly-accom-flyer-update-8-4-16-JV.pdf>. Work toward State regulation of body corporate and rental properties to make it illegal to prohibit someone from keeping a cat or dog (as a family member), provided they comply with reasonable standards of animal care, and maintenance of the property. Pet references and Pet Agreements can be required to assist with this.

2. Behaviour not meeting owners' expectations or experience level: Provide advice and support through an Animal Helpline, referral to appropriate affordable training to address the most common behavioural issues e.g. escaping, excessive barking, not getting on with existing pet, not getting on with the children, chasing livestock, timid, not house-trained, too strong to handle. Friendly animal management patrols in problem areas offering support can help.

3. Too many animals and inappropriate selection: Breeder and Pet Shop Permits with user-pays inspections ensure that all breeders and sellers of pets consider the numbers of animals needing homes, and do not contribute to the problem. They should be required to provide appropriate care and socialisation for the animals, and information and support for new owners. They should be required to show responsibility for the lifetime rehoming of the animals

they breed/sell. Responsible breeders who care about their animals do this already and will appreciate the recognition. Consumers should be able to search for responsible breeders in a government register.

CONCLUSION

An ongoing Council-funded NDN Cooperative Desexing Program is a proactive animal management strategy, essential to reducing the oversupply of cats and kittens in any community. It provides more positive and ethical outcomes for animals, owners and the whole community. Cooperative Desexing Programs:

- reduce costs for animal management
- help increase compliance with animal local and state laws
- reduce nuisance issues for animal and non-animal owners
- help achieve a sustainable reduction in incoming impounded and euthanased animals over time.

For further information on how NDN can organise and manage a Cooperative Desexing Program for you, contact: Joy Verrinder, Strategic Director, AWLQ, NDN and G2Z jverrinder@awlqld.com.au Ph 0417 788 063

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