The Benefits of Councils Funding NDN Co-operative Desexing Programs
INFORMATION FOR COUNCILLORS, ANIMAL MANAGEMENT COORDINATORS & VETERINARIANS

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INTRODUCTION

Euthanasia rates of both dogs and cats are a significant community concern in pounds and shelters around Australia, particularly for cats, with euthanasia rates at least twice, sometimes three times, that of dogs in most places.

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

A range of strategies has been used by AWLQ, working with Gold Coast City Council to achieve this sustained reduction, summarised in the Getting to Zero model http://www.g2z.org.au/pdf/G2Z%20Brochure%20200912.pdf. One of the most important strategies has been low cost desexing and desexing promotion to prevent unwanted animals rather than Council having to Collect/Hold/Euthana, the traditional strategy which is expensive and fails to sustainably reduce incoming numbers.

This document focuses on the benefits and procedures for organising a Cooperative Cat Desexing Program, an essential strategy for reducing unwanted cats in your community. Its relevance to dogs is also discussed at the end of this paper.

BENEFITS of CO-OPERATIVE 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 $60 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 DESEXING SUBSIDIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cat management strategies</th>
<th>COST Collect/Hold/ Euthanase one cat</th>
<th>COST Collect /Hold/ Rehome one cat</th>
<th>COST Council Desexing Subsidy (average) One cat</th>
<th>SAVINGS by preventing one unwanted cat, instead of euthanasing</th>
<th>SAVINGS by preventing one unwanted cat, instead of rehoming</th>
<th>Savings by desexing 300 cats (cost $18 000), instead of euthanasing *</th>
<th>Savings by desexing 300 cats (cost $18 000), instead of rehoming *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COSTS/SAVINGS held average 4 days</td>
<td>$220</td>
<td>$620</td>
<td>$60</td>
<td>$160</td>
<td>$560</td>
<td>$48 000</td>
<td>$168 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COSTS held 14 days (on average)</td>
<td>$420</td>
<td>$820</td>
<td>$60</td>
<td>$360</td>
<td>$760</td>
<td>$108 000</td>
<td>$228 000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*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, they may 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 litter). Because:

- **a.** Most owners (72% in the 2014 SA study) 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for not desexing</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Too young</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of desexing procedure</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want to breed</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too old</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 the main reasons for not desexing. As well, 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.

**Figure 1: AWLQ Surrenders**

**Reasons for not desexing Cats over 2 mths 2009 - 2010**

- Too Young: 34%
- Didn’t Get Around To It: 32%
- Cost: 14%
- Wanted to Breed: 8%
- Info Not Provided: 8%
- Stray: 9%
- Other: 2%

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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.

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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. As only 47% of owned cats were desexed at 3-6 months, 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** through a reduction in abandoned and euthanized animals.

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. **Increase microchipping and registration compliance.** Where cats are required to be registered with an incentive of reduced registration for a desexed animal, people on low incomes often cannot afford to get their cat desexed to access the more affordable cheaper rates. So 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 as well at the cheaper rate. 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. **Increase compliance with breeder permit and desexing legislation.** Some 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. To

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enable compliance, owners on low incomes need to be offered subsidised desexing. See explanation on the G2Z website at [http://www.g2z.org.au/recommended-legislation.html](http://www.g2z.org.au/recommended-legislation.html) of a model Breeder Permit system which requires kittens to be desexed prior to sale or transfer by anyone who breeds.

8. **Increased job satisfaction for animal management staff.** Councils will be more likely to recruit and retain enthusiastic staff members if they can achieve job satisfaction by taking a positive approach. Offering desexing support to the community means fewer unwanted litters of kittens, a fall in euthanasia rates and fewer complaints about wandering unwanted cats over time.

**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 Overpopulation 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.**

[www.ndn.org.au](http://www.ndn.org.au)
HOW A CO-OPERATIVE DESEXING PROGRAM WORKS

1. Councils fund an annual amount e.g. $5 000 - $55 000 to subsidise desexing costs for residents in need i.e.
   - holders of pension, concession or health care cards
   - people on low incomes
   - people with large numbers of cats

2. Costs are shared between owners, Council, veterinarians and animal welfare groups. Prices must be low enough to allow cat owners on a pension or low income to contribute, yet still cover veterinary costs.

EXAMPLE: City of Gold Coast Co-operative Desexing Program

Participants: Owners, Gold Coast City Council, Animal Welfare League Qld’s National Desexing Network, participating Gold Coast vet clinics

2018/19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATS</th>
<th>Owner pays</th>
<th>Council Subsidy</th>
<th>Vet receives*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male cat castration</td>
<td>$35</td>
<td>$55</td>
<td>$90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female cat spey</td>
<td>$55 for first cat</td>
<td>$65</td>
<td>$120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$35 for additional cats</td>
<td>$85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This covers current veterinary costs of wages and materials plus GST. These prices are reviewed and adjusted over time as needed.

As an incentive to keep the mother cat and desex her, a Last Litter Program can be offered to owners surrendering unwanted kittens. Owners surrender the kittens free of charge, if they keep the mother cat and desex her with a $55 desexing voucher. It is more economical and efficient for Councils and animal welfare groups, to help owners to desex and keep the mother cat, as adult cats usually take longer and cost more to rehome, as they are more likely to get stressed and sick, and require ongoing veterinary treatment.

Our experienced NDN team organises and manages the program for Councils.

Funding from Council Budget: The amount depends on the size of the population and the need. In 2018/19 Council funding for this program ranged between $8 000 and $52 000.

3. Participating vets: Local vets are invited to participate. The local animal welfare agency may also have an established network of vets. Vets receive recognition, acknowledging their contribution to preventing unwanted animals in the community e.g. through various media, and a Certificate of Appreciation for display.

4. 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.

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5. The program **runs all year** round and **must be heavily promoted** once or twice a year, preferably in low breeding season between June and September, and in conjunction with NDN’s National Desexing Month in July. This is to capture as many cats as possible and minimise the number of more costly pregnant and in-season cats needing to be desexed.

**High impact promotion over short periods** is recommended to build awareness of the need for desexing and the benefits. Gold Coast City marketing programs have been used to increase knowledge of the benefits of desexing and early age desexing, and create a sense of urgency to act. Messages include:

- 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](http://www.ndn.org.au) provides fliers 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) team is experienced in running these programs and can 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.

(v) When cat owners phone NDN, eligibility is determined 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 pre-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 and pay their $35 or $55 on the day of the desexing, and give the voucher to the vet clinic.

(viii) NDN sends claim forms to participating vet clinics to return with redeemed vouchers at the end of each month.

(ix) NDN checks claim forms and vouchers and reimburses veterinarians from Council funds.

(x) NDN keeps records of vouchers issued and numbers of male and female cats desexed. If time permits, NDN contacts owners who have not redeemed their vouchers to determine why, encourage and support.

(xi) NDN organises further promotion via social media etc until all funding has been used.

(xii) Councils should 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) to demonstrate if the program is having an effect in reducing numbers of unwanted kittens and cats over a number of years, along with reclaimed, rehomed and euthanized numbers.

(xiii) Because of the fast breeding rate of cats, it is important to continue this funding each year to prevent escalation of numbers.

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COMMUNITY 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:

a. longer and more prolific breeding rate of cats
b. double or triple euthanasia rates of cats
c. 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 4). Providing desexing subsidies to encourage desexing by those who don’t get around to it, before breeding age, and targeting low income earners, will help to reduce stray and surrender numbers.

![Figure 5 AWL Qld Surrenders Reasons for not desexing Dogs over 2 months 2009 - 2010](www.ndn.org.au)
Other Proactive Strategies to Prevent Unwanted Adult Dogs

Preventing Stray Dogs

a. 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](http://www.g2z.org.au/6th-national-g2z-summit-2015.html)
b. Return straying animals home whenever possible, with support to fix the problem, instead of impounding
c. Waive impounding fees initially, if owners address desexing, yard containment issues and enrichment
d. Waive or reduce impound fees if owners take advantage of subsidised desexing for impounded dogs, prior to release
e. 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 5*) 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.

![Figure 5 Dogs - Reasons for Surrender
Gold Coast 2009 - 2010](http://example.com)

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

[www.ndn.org.au](http://www.ndn.org.au)
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](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 your Council’s Cooperative Desexing Program, contact: Joy Verrinder, Strategic Director, AWLQ, NDN and G2Z jverrinder@awlqld.com.au Ph 0417 788 063

**REFERENCES**
