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INFORMATION FOR COUNCILLORS, PUBLIC HEALTH MANAGERS & ANIMAL MANAGEMENT COORDINATORS

The Benefits of Councils Funding Co-operative Cat Desexing Programs

Updated 2015

Introduction

The Getting to Zero program (www.g2z.com.au) has resulted in significant reduction in numbers of unwanted and euthanased cats and dogs in a whole large city.

Euthanasia rates of both dogs and cats is 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. Many communities still euthanase approximately 60% of their abandoned cats and have been euthanasing similar proportions for many years.

However, Gold Coast City has halved its cat euthanasia rate over the last 10 years to 25- 30% of **all** incoming cats, one of the lowest rates in Australia for a whole large city of over half a million people.

While the Getting to Zero program involves a range of strategies, one of the most important strategies has been low cost desexing and desexing promotion to prevent unwanted animals rather than having to Collect/Hold/Euthanase.

Council Funding for a Desexing Program makes economic sense.

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**.

In contrast, the cost to Gold Coast City Council of a Co-operative Desexing Program, working with local private practice veterinarians and the Animal Welfare League of Qld (AWLQ), is **\$40** per cat. The savings from funding this desexing cost rather than the costs of collecting, holding and euthanasing the progeny of the undesexed cat are presented in Table 1. These costs are conservative, as they do not account for the 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

Cat management strategies	Collect/ Hold/ Euthanase one cat/one litter	Council Desexing Subsidy One cat	Savings by preventing one unwanted kitten / or one litter	Savings in 1 year if 250 cats desexed (cost \$10 000), preventing one litter each
COSTS/SAVINGS held 4 days (on average)	\$220/260	\$40	\$180/220	\$55 000
COSTS held 14 days (on average)	\$420/480	\$40	\$380/440	\$110 000

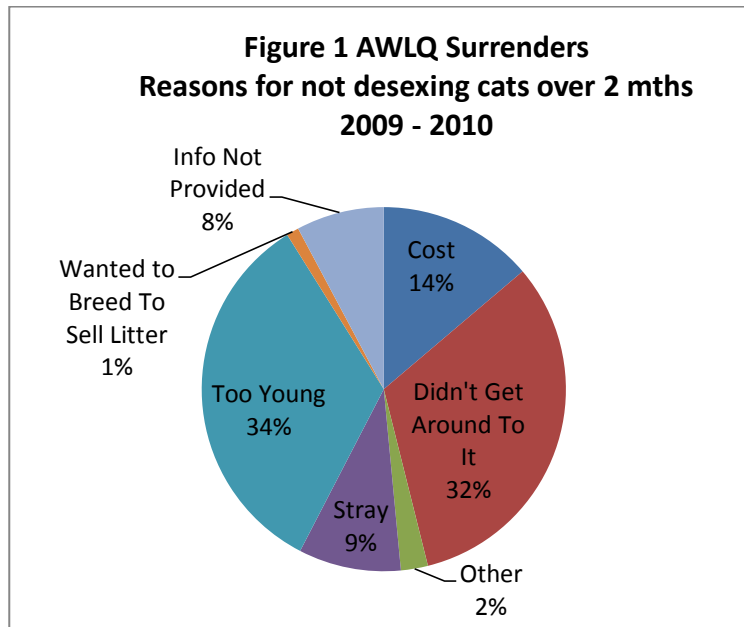
Immediate savings

As can be seen from **Table 1** above, the more cats desexed, the fewer excess animals will be born, to be collected, housed and euthanased or rehomed by Councils. Data on source of surrendered (i.e. owned) cats of for the whole of Gold Coast City shows 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 because:

- a. owners are unaware that cats can be pregnant from 4 months of age, and
- b. three quarters of veterinary practices are still not promoting the safety and benefits of Early Age Desexing from 2-3 months of age.

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 and 14% were undesexed due to cost of desexing. A further 34% were undesexed because owners thought their cat was too young. Promotion of the urgency of desexing and making it accessible to all through a Desexing Subsidy Program helps to address all of these reasons for not desexing i.e. 80% of people who surrender cats. See **Figure 1. 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.**



Long term savings

The long term effect for Councils of investing in desexing, rather than catch/hold/euthanase, is a decrease in the number of felines coming in to the pound and shelter over time. **Figure 2** shows the decline in incoming kitten numbers in Gold Coast City (and the resulting decline in kitten euthanasia), which has resulted largely from sustained low cost desexing and desexing promotion. Since the number of kittens one cat can produce over 5 – 10 years ranges between approximately 40 and 300, encouraging just one extra person to desex their cat through discounted rates can make a huge difference to the work load of animal management officers.



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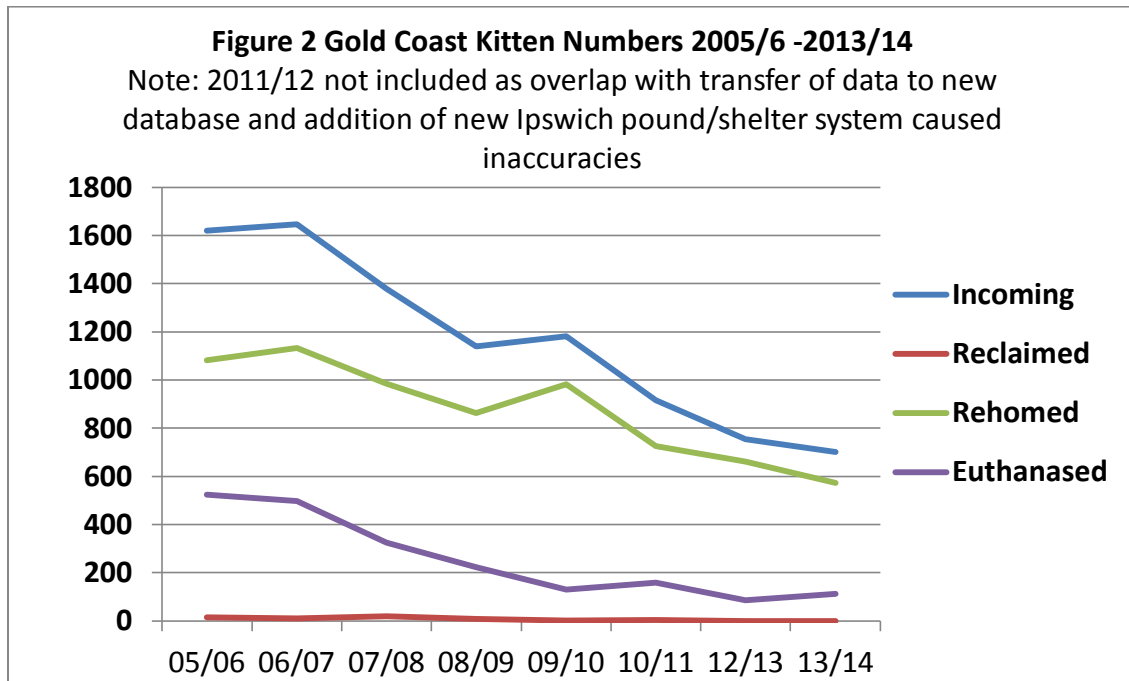


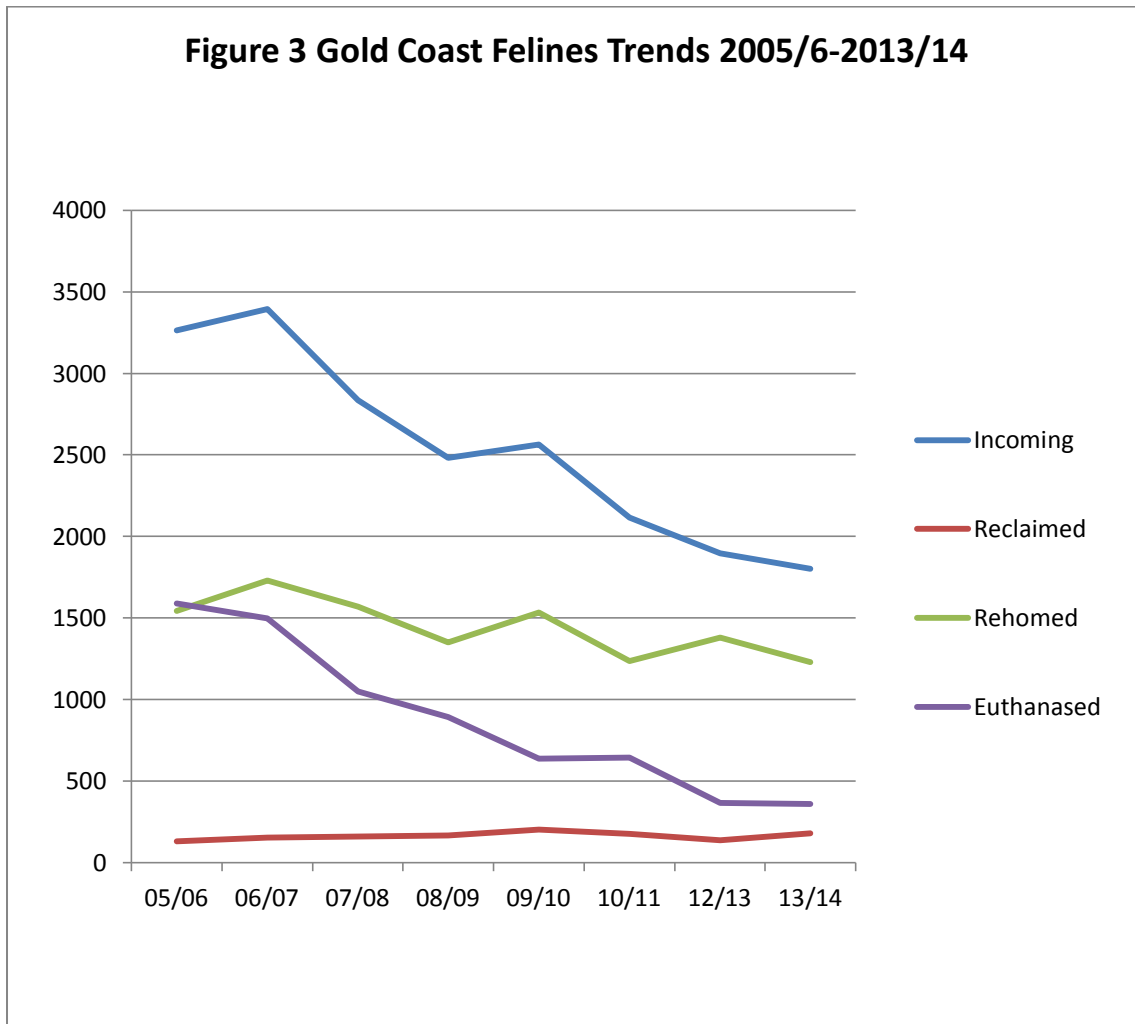
Figure 3 shows the trend in reduction of incoming Gold Coast cats with over 1460 fewer cats coming in as stray or surrendered in Gold Coast City between 2005/6 and 2013/14. 1460 fewer cats to collect/hold/and euthanase represent a cost saving of approximately \$262 800 in just 8 years. The additional cost to rehome of \$300 per cat represents an additional cost saving of \$438 000.



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Figure 3 Gold Coast Felines Trends 2005/6-2013/14



Desexing owned cats also reduces the workload of Animal Management Departments in managing unowned cats. A study published in 2007 showed that 20% of owned cats are not contained to their property at all times.¹ Wandering owned domestic cats, of which between 10%¹ and 63%² may be undesexed if less than 12 months of age, can breed to contribute to the unowned cat population. Council desexing programs of owned animals help to limit these feral populations, which are difficult to control.

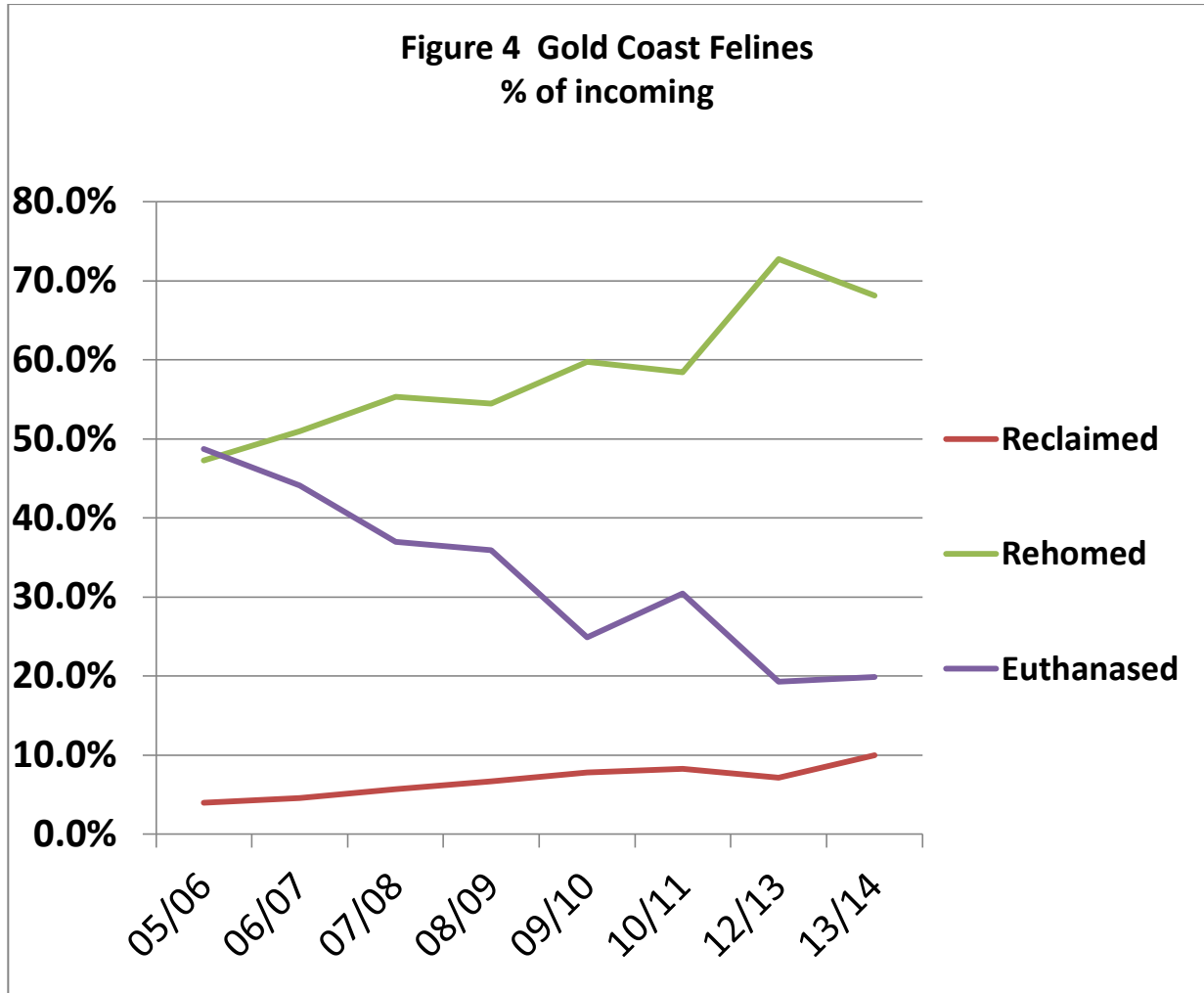
Other benefits to Councils from Funding Cooperative Desexing Programs

1. A reduction in both abandonment and euthanasia. As most Animal Management Departments know, communities are increasingly aware of, and disapprove of, the euthanasia of abandoned healthy and treatable cats and dogs. **Figures 2 & 3** can be used to show these programs do work. Communities also appreciate any reduction in nuisance issues that result from unwanted and abandoned animals. **Figure 4**



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shows how a community can change from higher proportions of euthanased than rehomed animals to the reverse.



2. Desexing is a more effective strategy for reducing Animal Management workload than focussing on purely on registration and microchipping. NSW state-wide pound data has demonstrated that long term compulsory registration and microchipping alone have not significantly reduced the proportion of cats euthanased in NSW. On average, 67% of cats were euthanased in NSW regions in 2009/10, a reduction of only 1% since 2005/6.³ Tackling the issues on a city/shire wide basis is the key. Gold Coast City whole-of-city data demonstrate that ongoing desexing subsidy programs and desexing promotion do work.
3. Desexing subsidy programs help increase registration and microchipping compliance. With registration differentials for desexed cats and dogs in most communities, cat and dog owners with financial difficulties



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are able to more readily afford registration when their dog or cat is desexed at the subsidised rate. Microchipping can 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 for the first year at the time of desexing can also be offered as an incentive, which saves having to find these cats in the future. Desexing subsidy programs are an essential support for Breeder Permit legislation, to address both unplanned and poor breeding practices. If breeders pay a fee to Animal Management to cover costs of inspection of breeding establishments, a subsidised desexing program provides a cheaper option. See explanation on [Breeder Permits on the G2Z website](#).

4. Increased satisfaction of Animal Management staff. Councils will be more likely to recruit and retain enthusiastic staff members who are able to achieve job satisfaction and take a more positive approach through offering desexing support to the community, a fall in euthanasia rates and fewer complaints about wandering unwanted cats over time.
5. A Council Desexing Program can be assisted by working with local veterinarians and animal welfare/rescue groups.

How a targeted sustainable Co-operative Desexing Program works

1. **Subsidies are based on need** and made available to:
 - holders of pension, concession or health care cards
 - people on low incomes with large numbers of cats
 - people facing financial difficulties who can't afford to have their cat desexed
 - people caring for semi-owned or community catsExplain to the community that Council funds need to be used to help desex as many animals as possible over a number of years to achieve success. This usually means that people do not try to take advantage of the program unless they really need it.
2. **Costs are shared between owners, Council, animal welfare groups and veterinarians.** Prices must be low enough to allow cat owners on a pension or low income to contribute. Consider the most reasonable rates possible in your community, taking into consideration existing subsidy programs that might be offered currently by animal welfare groups and veterinarians. Use the following guidelines summarised in **Table 2**.



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Table 2 Guidelines for sharing of costs in a G2Z Co-operative Cat Desexing Program (Updated July 2015)

	OWNER	COUNCIL	ANIMAL WELFARE GROUP (May provide personnel to manage the program on behalf of Council and/or contribute to desexing costs, depending on availability & resources)	TOTAL PAYMENT TO VETERINARIAN	APPROX. VET COSTS including wages (2015)
Female Cat Spay*	\$55 - \$60	\$55 - \$60	\$0 - \$60	\$110 - \$180	\$ 101
Male Cat Castration	\$45 - \$50	\$45 - \$50	\$0 - \$30	\$90 - \$130	\$ 85

**If a female cat is pregnant or in season, an additional \$40 can be claimed by the vet clinic from the Council Subsidy Fund. (This means slightly fewer cats desexed (approx 20% of cats may be pregnant or in season, with more in peak breeding season), or an extra 20-30% can be added to the budget).*

Note: Since costs are usually rising, the proportions each party pays can be adjusted to accommodate the needs of cat owners, veterinarians and Council, but must remain at a realistic level that is affordable for owners on low incomes.

If all or most vet clinics in your municipality participate, each clinic will have to desex fewer animals at a subsidised rate and can set aside a slower day or evening for this extra work. If only one or two vet clinics participate, they will benefit from increased business, with less down time, compensating the reduction in profit from each service with the quantity of services offered, and strong support from the community.

EXAMPLE

Gold Coast Community Desexing Program 2015

Participants: Owners, Gold Coast City Council, Animal Welfare League of Qld, 10 Gold Coast Vet Clinics (approx. one quarter of all clinics)

Cat owners in need of support pay **\$40 to desex a female cat and \$25 to desex a male cat** and receive a voucher worth **\$50** from Council funding. Thus **veterinarians receive \$90 for a female and \$75 for a male cat desexing**, and **an extra \$30** if the cat is pregnant or in season. AWLQ contributes by providing the staff to manage the issuing of subsidies and reimbursement of veterinarians. For owners of multiple cats/kittens, for each **additional female cat owners pay \$25**, with a voucher worth **\$65** from Council, so that vet clinics still received \$90 per female cat, and overall cost for multiple cats is then not as prohibitive for the owner.



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Although a donation is encouraged with surrender of kittens for desexing and rehoming, owners are able to surrender the kittens free of charge if they keep the mother cat and pay \$40 for a Gold Coast Desexing Voucher to desex her.

3. **Funding from Council Budget:** Councils can allocate funds proportionally based on **population size and the need**. For example, Gold Coast City has a human population of 550 000. The GCCC subsidy contribution from 2010 - 2015 has been **\$10 000 per year with an additional approximately \$2000 for promotion**. Since 2015, Council funding has increased to accommodate an increased payment per cat from \$40 to \$50. The funding was used to desex female cats only at first (expanding to include male cats after approximately 6 months).
4. Ongoing sustained subsidised desexing is important. Low cost desexing has been offered since 2001 in Gold Coast City (both targeted and non-targeted) with a minimum of 2000 owned cats and dogs per year being desexed through the AWL Community Vet Clinic. Special discounts have been offered with up to 12 clinics participating in National Desexing Month since 2003. In the first Desexing Month, 850 dogs and cats were desexed in July/August alone, supported by AWLQ and a \$10 000 Council funded advertising campaign).
5. **Participating vets:** Contact all vets in your area to invite them to participate. (A sample letter can be provided through G2Z, contact info@g2z.org.au). The animal welfare agency may already have an established network of vets who will participate. Vets should receive recognition, acknowledging their contribution to assisting prevent unwanted animals in the community e.g. through media reports, and/or a Certificate of Appreciation for display.

Consistent conditions of participation need to be explained at the outset i.e.

- a. Pain relief to be included at no extra cost
- b. No requirement to vaccinate before desexing, as this inflates the cost beyond the reach of low income earners. If vets are worried about cross infection of their patients, then can allocate a specific day or evening and an area in their clinic for unvaccinated animals.
- c. If animals are pregnant or in season, there is no extra charge to the owner, and vets are reimbursed at a standard rate (e.g. \$30) from the Council subsidy fund. If low income earners have to pay more, they are likely to delay desexing, resulting in more unwanted animals for Council to manage.

Why veterinarians should participate in Co-operative Desexing Programs

The evidence shows that promotion of subsidised desexing programs increases the number of desexings in the community overall.⁴ Veterinary clinics can thrive from increased business and a satisfaction that they are helping to address the euthanasia of unwanted animals in their community.

- a. Co-operative Desexing Programs work to achieve what most people desire i.e. ending the killing of healthy and treatable cats and dogs, which many veterinarians are faced with in their own practices, and in pounds and shelters.



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The Queensland AVA President, Dr Tony Thelander, noted in his Report on the 4th National G2Z Summit to End Companion Animal Overpopulation in the ASAVA The Companion Issue 24 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.”^{4(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”.^{4(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”.^{4(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”.^{4(p.745)}
 - c. The benefits for vets include being able to 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 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.
 - d. Having an ongoing subsidy to offer to owners who have an unwanted litter or an undesexed cat will be additional business, as these owners are not likely to be able to afford the service.
6. **Who manages the subsidies:** Issuing of subsidies can be managed by Council staff, a local animal welfare group, or the National Desexing Network (NDN) (for a small fee). NDN has a 1300 number for free access nationwide, a process for assessing eligibility, issuing vouchers and liaising with a network of vets. (If you would like NDN to manage your program, please consider the local animal welfare groups’ capacity first. NDN always endeavours to work with local groups to achieve a co-operative and effective local effort. Phone 1300 368 992).
7. **When to start the program:** Having a promotional National Desexing Month event each year in July, before the spring/summer breeding season (Sept til March, or May/June in northern Australia) means fewer cats born and fewer cats likely to be pregnant or in-season. (This saves money as it costs more to



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desex a pregnant or in-season cat. Some vets and owners may delay the desexing if an animal is pregnant, and so the owner gets caught in the cycle of ongoing cat pregnancies, producing preventable stray and surrendered animals for Council to manage.)

8. **Promotion:** Have a blitz of advertising and promotion in the month prior to the Desexing Month. Owners then have time to hear the message and make appointments. If the month is booked out (this is usual), still offer the subsidy if the owner books during Desexing Month, even if their appointment has to be in the following month. If all the allocated funds for the Desexing Subsidy Program are not used in this month, plan another promotion immediately after the month for desexing mother cats and litters. Encourage owners to keep the desexed mother cat (which are harder to rehome) and hand kittens into the shelter when they are 1 kg in weight, for desexing and rehoming.

A promotions budget needs to be allocated, based on size of population and need. A budget of \$10 000 per annum for the initial year or two (for a human population of 500 000) has been allocated by AWLQ and/or Gold Coast City Council with between \$2000 and \$5000 in other years.

High impact advertising over short periods is recommended to kick start 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 included:

- “Cats can be pregnant by 4 months of age”;
- “It is just as safe to desex from 2 months of age”;
- “Too many kittens, not enough homes”;
- “Prevent an unwanted litter – desex now before the spring breeding season”.
- Desexing your pet has positive advantages for its behaviour. Desexed animals are less likely to wander, 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) offers posters and media to help promote desexing in July.

9. **Procedure:**

- (i) Contact local animal welfare groups to see if they already have desexing subsidy programs running to organise a coordinated program. Some groups with a network of participating local veterinarians (sometimes with even lower prices than in the guidelines above) may just need additional funding to solve the problems of oversupply in your community.
- (ii) Consider whether free registration and low cost microchipping should be included with the desexing incentive. This can be helpful to ensure that people are not deterred from applying for desexing



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- thinking that Council will use it as means to and recognise desexed animals can be recollected by their owner if they stray. Participating vets may be encouraged to offer discounted microchipping for those getting the subsidised desexing vouchers or a Co-operative cost sharing could be included e.g. owner pays \$10, Councils pay a \$10 subsidy which means veterinarians get \$20 to cover costs.
- (iii) Organise pre-numbered vouchers and reimbursement forms with individual Council logo and information.
 - (iv) Send letter to local veterinary clinics to request their participation.
 - (v) Organise a Community Awareness Campaign about how cat owners can apply for desexing support. Participating vets receive free promotion on the voucher and through various media, acknowledging their contribution to reducing the oversupply of cats. A Certificate of Appreciation should also be issued to each participating veterinarian.
 - (vi) Cat owners phone the managing organisation, who will determine if each owner is eligible (based on pension, concession, health care card, large numbers of cats, or severe financial hardship).
 - (vii) A pre-numbered voucher is sent to each eligible cat owner which includes instructions (sample voucher can be provided). The voucher must be presented to the vet at the time of desexing.
 - (viii) A spread sheet of vouchers issued is maintained. This is important for follow up and record keeping.
 - (ix) Participating vet clinics return all redeemed vouchers to the NDN at the end of each month with a Desexing Voucher Summary Form (sample form can be provided). Reminders are sent out to all vets to whom cat owners have been referred each month.
 - (x) Vouchers are issued with an expiry date of one month. Redeemed vouchers are checked against issued vouchers to follow up with phone calls to owners who have not redeemed their vouchers. If necessary appointments can be made on behalf of the cat owner, and reminder calls just prior to the appointment date. Occasionally a collection-and-return service is needed for people who cannot afford petrol or do not have a car to transport their animal to the vet clinic. A group of volunteers from local animal welfare groups can usually be recruited for these collection-and-return services free of charge.
 - (xi) At the end of the first month identify how many vouchers have been used to determine if the offer needs to be further promoted for another period e.g. ongoing or another specified month, until all vouchers have been used.



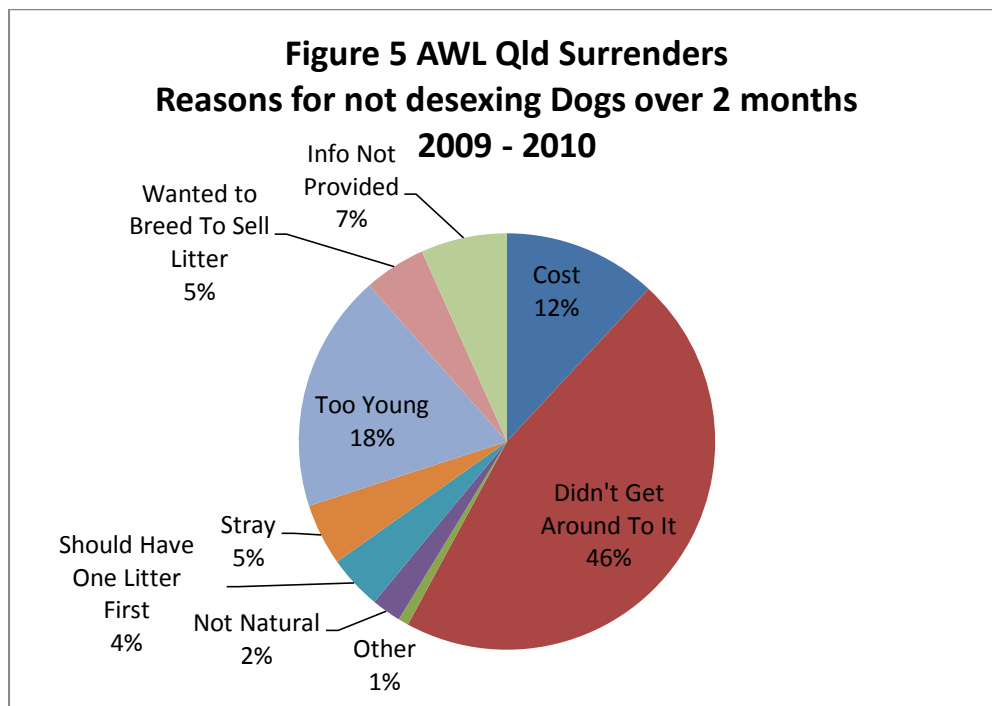
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Community Desexing Programs can also include dogs

Councils need to analyse their own 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.

Desexing is a contributing factor to easier management of dogs. For the majority of undesexed dogs that are surrendered on the Gold Coast, owners indicate their main reasons were not getting around to it, their dog was too young or the cost (Figure 4). Providing some desexing subsidies for a desexing month as incentive to encourage those who don't get around to it, and for dogs whose owners have limited means may be helpful to reduce stray and surrender numbers. Promotion of the benefits of desexing of dogs and offering incentives such as low cost registration and microchipping is also helpful.



Other proactive strategies to prevent unwanted adult dogs

Preventing stray dogs



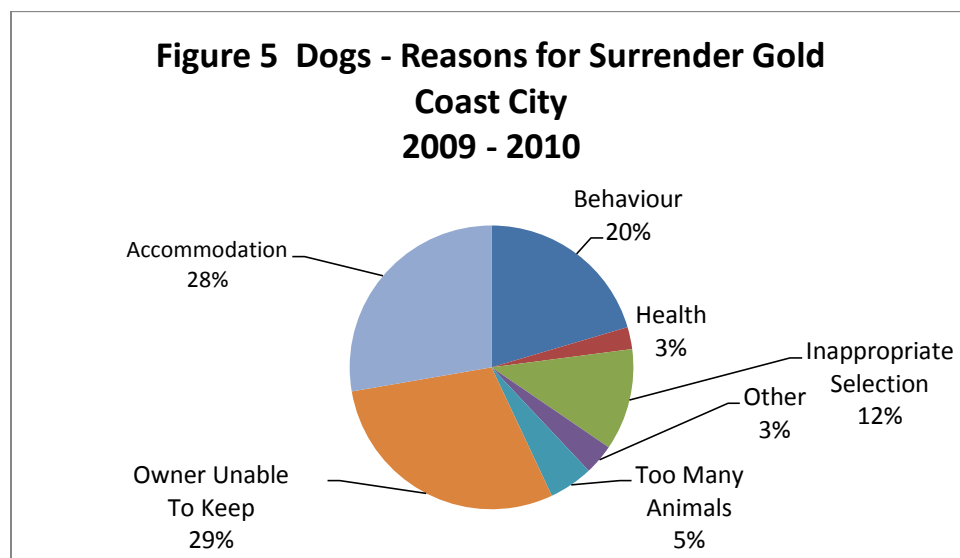
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- returning animals home instead of impounding whenever possible, and advising owners on how to address the cause
- waiving impounding fees initially, if owners follow animal management advice to address yard containment issues and enrichment
- offering reduced impound fees if owners take advantage of free/subsidised desexing for impounded dogs prior to release
- enable reclaim of impounded animals by offering low income owners payment plans

Preventing surrendered dogs

Gather data on the main reasons for surrendered dogs in your city shire. For example on the Gold Coast while the main reasons for surrendered cats is having too many animals, requiring the strategy of desexing, the main reasons for surrender of dogs (**Figure 5**) are:

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



While it is difficult to prevent owners' changes in circumstances, addressing the other three main causes will reduce intake by up to 60%, making it possible to rehome the 40% of animals unfortunate enough to be surrendered because their owners had changes in circumstances, as well as the few unwanted puppies and animals with health issues.



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- 1. Accommodation issues:** Working with other government departments to revise regulations of body corporate and rental properties to make it illegal to prohibit someone from keeping a cat or dog (as family members), provided they have a pet bond and follow a Pet Agreement based on reasonable standards of animal care, and maintenance of the property
- 2. Behaviour not meeting owners' expectations or experience level:** Provide an Animal Helpline to offer advice, and referral to appropriate affordable training, to address the basic 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.
- 3. Breeder and Pet Shop Permits to improve Standards of Rehoming:** Ensure that all breeders and sellers of pets are required to have a permit and show responsibility for the lifetime rehoming of the animals they breed. Responsible breeders who care about their animals do this already and will appreciate the recognition as a responsible breeder. Consumers will also appreciate being able to recognise them and purchase puppies and kittens from them, ignoring those who exploit animals and sell without appropriate information or support for new owners. **For further information please contact the G2Z Coordinator by [email](#) on or 0427 981 759.**

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