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The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) is a peak research body and advocate for pet welfare in Australia. As a not-for-profit organisation, APWF uses science-based research to enhance community well-being and improve the health and welfare of animals and people. APWF specialises in evidence-based solutions to prevent euthanasia of healthy and treatable companion animals in shelters and pounds and the associated mental health damage to staff and community residents. We share research knowledge with the community, shelters and pounds, state and local governments and veterinarians to create change and save animal and human lives. APWF is led by Chief Scientist Dr. Jacquie Rand, Emeritus Professor of Companion Animal Health at The University of Queensland (UQ) and a registered specialist veterinarian in small animal internal medicine. She has worked extensively in shelter research over the last 17 years, including collaborative studies with the RSPCA, Animal Welfare League and local governments. While at UQ Dr Rand taught Urban Animal Management and since 2013 has co-authored over 30 peer-reviewed articles on urban animal management including management of semi-owned and unowned cats. Dr Rand is an AVA member.

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Evaluation of animal control services provided by the Council

Based on Moira Shire's 2021–2025 Domestic Animal Management Plan (DAMP), the range of services provided is broadly consistent with other Victorian councils. Core functions, such as animal identification and registration, complaint response, routine patrols, and community education, are well established, though primarily reactive. The Shire has introduced some proactive measures, including the annual registration giveaway, which aims to increase registration compliance and community participation. The use of a dedicated "lost and found" Facebook page also reflects a proactive approach to reuniting pets with their owners.

As of 2020, Moira Shire recorded 4,496 registered dogs and only 1,208 registered cats, highlighting a significant disparity in compliance. In 2019–2020, council impounded 318 dogs and 311 cats. Of the cats impounded, only 12 were reclaimed, indicating low reclaim rates, particularly for cats. This underscores the need for more targeted strategies for cat management and community engagement.

While community consultation is an important component of DAMP development, these plans must ultimately be grounded in evidence and align with legislative requirements, local animal population data, service demand, and welfare outcomes. The 2021 community survey received only 149 responses, a small and

potentially unrepresentative sample that may skew planning priorities. Relying on such limited feedback risks overlooking the needs of underrepresented groups, including cat owners and vulnerable residents.

Future iterations of the DAMP would benefit from broader, more inclusive community engagement and stronger data collection. This would support more effective, equitable, and proactive animal management strategies across the Shire.

The scope and objectives outlined in Moira Shire Council's animal management services reflect a relatively standard framework consistent with animal management practices across Victoria. These include managing registration and identification schemes, responding to nuisance and aggressive animals, regulating domestic animal businesses, and promoting responsible pet ownership through community education. While these core functions align with statutory requirements and sector norms, there is an opportunity to modernise aspects of the language used in the 2021–2025 Domestic Animal Management Plan. For instance, the role currently referred to as “pound cleaner” could be more appropriately titled “animal attendant,” which better reflects the breadth of duties involved in animal care and aligns with contemporary industry terminology used across shelters and councils.

Training of authorised officers

Moira Shire Council's planned training schedule for authorised officers demonstrates a strong commitment to ongoing professional development, with officers participating in a wide range of practical and compliance-focused training, including animal rehousing assessment, safe dog handling, conflict management, and first aid. However, it is worth noting that only one officer currently holds a Certificate IV in Animal Control and Regulation and Statutory Compliance, a key qualification for the sector. While the team brings significant on-road experience, the lack of formal certification among the majority of officers highlights a gap that could be addressed through structured upskilling. Ensuring more officers hold nationally recognised qualifications would not only strengthen operational consistency and confidence in enforcement but also enhance animal welfare outcomes across the Shire. However it is noted to upskill these officers was a planned task in the 2021-2025 DAMP.

Programs to promote and encourage responsible ownership of dogs and cats

Moira Shire Council's current approach to cat management relies heavily on traditional, reactive measures that are increasingly recognised as ineffective (Cotterell 2024). While the

broader training and animal management strategies demonstrate some investment in community education and enforcement, the continued use of cat trapping programs remains problematic. Trapping is labour-intensive, often fails to resolve the underlying issue of breeding populations and can result in high euthanasia rates when semi-owned or unowned cats are not reclaimed or rehomed. Without complementary strategies to address the root cause, uncontrolled breeding, cat nuisance issues persist, and community frustration grows.

In contrast, Moira Shire's involvement with the National Desexing Network (NDN) represents a far more effective and forward-thinking initiative. By providing access to low-cost desexing, the Shire is addressing the problem at its source: preventing unwanted litters and reducing the number of unowned cats in the community. This program, combined with improved public education around responsible cat ownership and the benefits of containment, is far more likely to produce long-term outcomes than reactive trapping alone. Strengthening and promoting the NDN partnership, along with increasing awareness of cat enclosures and fostering programs, will be key to improving welfare and reducing the ongoing burden of cat management on council resources.

To minimise the risk of attacks by dogs on people and animals

Moira Shire has an opportunity to strengthen its approach to reducing dog attacks by complementing enforcement with proactive, preventative strategies. While existing measures, such as leash laws, patrols, and issuing infringements, are important, early engagement with dog owners at the first signs of non-compliance (e.g., rushing or dogs not under effective control) may help prevent escalation to serious incidents. Drawing on lessons from other councils, where many dog attacks were minor and only a small number progressed to prosecution, a greater focus on education and owner support can make a measurable difference.

Authorised Officers could be empowered to hold constructive conversations with owners about practical solutions, including fencing improvements, responsible confinement, and access to dog training resources. This non-punitive approach encourages behavioural change, especially in cases where owners may lack awareness or capacity to address risks. By shifting the emphasis from penalties to partnership, Moira Shire can foster community trust and reduce dog attack incidents through collaboration and early intervention.

To address any over-population and high euthanasia rates for dogs and cats

Moira Shire Council's current reliance on trapping programs to manage free-roaming cats raises serious concerns about both effectiveness and public accountability. Over the past four years, Council has impounded 647 cats classified as feral or wild, many of whom were likely semi-owned or simply frightened, rather than truly feral. Evidence from across Australia shows that trapping alone does not reduce cat populations long term and often leads to repeated cycles of trapping and euthanasia without addressing the root cause: unmanaged breeding. This approach is out of step with modern animal management practices and

undermines community expectations for humane treatment. Despite commendable efforts like the animal adoption program, which has helped reduce euthanasia rates for rehomingable pets, a large percentage, 44% of cats impounded in 2020–21, were still euthanased, many due to being classified as feral.

Perhaps most concerning is the policy to euthanase any impounded dog or cat that is not reclaimed or rehoused by or after the eight-day statutory holding period. This approach fails to consider individual circumstances, such as delays in locating owners, or opportunities for foster care, and it does not reflect contemporary standards of animal welfare or Moira Shire's social licence to operate. In a time when public expectations around the treatment of animals are rising, this policy risks community backlash and reputational harm. Council's support of the National Desexing Network and promotion of adoption are positive steps, but they must be backed by a shift toward more humane, proactive, and evidence-based strategies, such as targeted desexing to problematic areas, community education, and partnerships with mobile desexing capabilities, to truly reduce euthanasia rates and build long-term community trust.

Subsidised Desexing Vs Free Desexing Programs

Subsidised desexing programs can provide cost relief to pet owners but often fall short in changing behaviour, as they tend to attract people who were already planning to desex their pets. These programs mainly serve as a financial incentive rather than a catalyst for action. In contrast, free desexing initiatives paired with targeted community outreach are significantly more effective at reaching those who wouldn't otherwise access veterinary services, particularly in disadvantaged areas. By removing financial and logistical barriers and engaging directly with pet owners and semi-owners, these programs have a greater impact on reducing unwanted litters and lowering the number of animals entering shelters.

Community Cat Programs are essential to managing urban cat populations humanely and effectively. They focus on the true source of the issue, domestic cats that are owned, semi-owned, or unowned, not feral cats, which are rare in urban settings. Mislabelling frightened or unsocialised cats as "feral" leads to unnecessary euthanasia and missed opportunities for rehoming. Targeted desexing, combined with community education and outreach in hotspot areas, has been shown to significantly reduce intake, euthanasia, and complaints. Successful models, such as those implemented by Banyule Council, RSPCA NSW, and the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (Cotterell 2024, RSPCA NSW Report 2023, Rand 2024), demonstrate that councils can achieve meaningful, cost-effective results without relying on punitive measures like containment laws.

Definitions of cats

The APWF recognizes and supports the definitions of cats as delineated in the findings and recommendations from the RSPCA Australia's 2018 report, "Identifying

best practice domestic cat management in Australia." These definitions categorize cats as Feral and Domestic (owned, semi-owned, unowned).

Domestic cats

Domestic cats live around where people live and frequent. Cat management strategies should recognise three subcategories of domestic cats, as recommended by RSPCA (2018 report) including:

- **Owned cats** – these cats are identified with and cared for by a specific person and are directly dependent on humans. They are usually sociable, although sociability varies. These cats are also called pet cats.
- **Semi-owned cats** – these cats are directly dependent on humans and are intentionally fed by people who do not consider they own them. These cats are of varying sociability and are sometimes called stray cats.
- **Unowned cats** – these cats are indirectly dependent on humans and receive food from people unintentionally, such as via food waste bins. These cats are of varying sociability and are sometimes called stray cats.

Feral Cats

- **Feral cats-** Feral cats have no relationship with or dependence on humans (neither direct nor indirect), survive by hunting or scavenging for food, and live and reproduce in the wild (e.g., forests, woodlands, grasslands, deserts). Feral cats do not live in the vicinity of where people live and they do not receive food from humans intentionally (direct feeding) or unintentionally (e.g. via food waste bins). Feral cats are completely unsocialised to humans and have none of their needs fulfilled by humans. Feral cats are not found or trapped in the vicinity of where people live, are not the subject of nuisance complaints and do not enter Australian council pounds or animal shelters.

Failure to recognize and apply these definitions in urban and peri-urban or township areas, to cat management programs can have severe consequences, leading to ineffective strategies and unnecessary euthanasia. When semi-owned and unowned domestic cats are misclassified as feral, they are often subjected to lethal control measures rather than being included in community-based desexing and rehoming programs. This misclassification undermines the effectiveness of proactive, humane solutions such as targeted desexing, which have been shown to stabilize and reduce free-roaming cat populations over time.

Additionally, conflating domestic cats with genuinely feral cats can result in misguided policies that penalize community members who provide informal care to semi-owned cats, discouraging public participation in effective management strategies. Without clear distinctions, councils may rely on reactive, punitive measures rather than investing in sustainable, evidence-based programs that reduce intake at shelters, improve animal welfare, and ultimately decrease the number of free-roaming cats in the long term.

Recognizing these definitions is essential to ensuring that cat management policies are humane, effective, and aligned with best practices in animal welfare. Research demonstrates that pet cats can respond with more aggressive behaviours to humans when highly stressed than genuinely feral cats. It is critical that before a decision that a cat is euthanised on behaviour, it is given sufficient time to adapt to a stressful environment. Outcome decisions relating to euthanasia based on behavioural characteristics must be deferred to allow the cat sufficient time to habituate to the unfamiliar environment (e.g., shelter or pound), given the likelihood that these cats will experience high levels of fear in a trap cage or unfamiliar environment. By not allowing a stressed cat to settle into the environment, this may result in the cat exhibiting signs of being unsocial and ultimately lead to higher euthanasia.

Cat Containment Laws

The **APWF congratulates Moira Shire Council for not introducing mandatory cat containment laws** in its current, 2021-2025 Domestic Animal Management Plan and hopes this remains unchanged in the 2026-2029 plan. This demonstrates a balanced, evidence-based approach that recognises both the limitations of enforcement and the potential unintended consequences of such mandates. Research consistently shows that compulsory containment policies lead to increased impoundments, complaints, and euthanasia of cats, particularly in rural and disadvantaged communities (APWF 2022, APWF 2023). These outcomes not only strain council resources but also undermine animal welfare and fail to address the underlying causes of free-roaming cat populations.

For cat containment strategies to be successful and equitable, councils must first identify clear goals and the specific areas where interventions are most needed. In many rural and low-income areas, the majority of free-roaming cats are either semi-owned or unidentifiable, and residents often lack the means to comply with containment requirements. Issues such as inadequate fencing, lack of window screening, or shared living spaces make containment impractical without financial support. In these settings, mandated containment risks becoming a social justice issue. Moira Shire's choice to avoid such mandates reflects a compassionate, practical understanding of local realities and creates an opportunity to focus instead on subsidised desexing, and voluntary containment support that are far more likely to deliver meaningful, long-term outcomes.

To minimise the potential for dogs and cats to create a nuisance

Community Cat Programs

In rural and semi-rural areas, where access to veterinary services is limited and residents often face economic challenges, traditional cat management strategies such as trapping and impounding are costly, ineffective, and increasingly unacceptable to the

community. The APWF supports targeted desexing initiatives that are adapted to the needs of these regions. Recent peer-reviewed research by Rand et al. (2024) demonstrated the effectiveness of a cat sterilisation program in a small rural town, showing measurable reductions in unwanted litters, shelter intake, and euthanasia rates. This study provides strong evidence that targeted, subsidised desexing can work in low-resource areas.

For councils like Moira, success lies in microtargeting areas with the highest cat-related complaints or impoundments and supporting desexing at sufficient scale, ideally 30 cats per 1,000 residents annually in hotspot areas, or 10 per 1,000 with precise microtargeting. Programs should be supported by strong local partnerships, including mobile or pop-up desexing services, especially where veterinary clinics are absent or over capacity. Council-funded subsidies and transport assistance, facilitated by Animal Management Officers (AMOs), can ensure access for residents in financial hardship or managing multiple cats. This proactive, place-based approach is more effective and socially acceptable than reactive trapping and euthanasia, aligning with modern community expectations and evidence-based best practice.

To effectively identify all dangerous dogs, menacing dogs and restricted breed dogs in that district and to ensure that those dogs are kept in compliance with this Act and the regulations

Responsible pet ownership assistance, support and intervention plays a critical role in managing dogs that may be classified as dangerous or menacing under the law. With the Local Court having the authority to declare a dog as dangerous or menacing based on specific criteria, including the dog's behaviour, or previous classification in another jurisdiction. However, relying solely on court declarations and enforcement actions does little to prevent incidents before they occur, as the damage has already been done. Education provides a proactive alternative, equipping dog owners with the knowledge and skills needed to prevent their pets from developing or displaying aggressive behaviours in the first place.

Education initiatives focused on responsible pet ownership can cover key areas such as early socialisation, obedience training, safe management of dogs in public spaces, and recognising early warning signs of aggression. When delivered in conjunction with community engagement and accessible training resources, these programs empower owners to take responsibility for their dogs' behaviour before escalation requires legal intervention.

One effective method is through property visits by Animal Management Officers (AMOs) with wandering dog complaints, who can then provide tailored advice on containment, supervision, and behavioural management. For example, if a dog has escaped, officers can speak directly with the owner to understand how the dog got out,

what challenges they are facing, and suggest realistic, cost-effective solutions, such as repairing fencing, using dog-proof gates, or adjusting routines to reduce anxiety-driven behaviours.

By increasing awareness of owners' legal obligations, such as proper confinement, leash use, and the consequences of aggressive behaviour, education can prevent situations that might otherwise lead to a dangerous or menacing declaration by the court. These one-on-one interactions help build trust and shift the dynamic from punitive to supportive, empowering owners to take action before enforcement becomes necessary. In doing so, councils and AMOs promote safety and wellbeing for both people and pets in the community, reduce the risk of future incidents, and avoid the financial and emotional burden of legal proceedings. Ultimately, responsible pet ownership education, when delivered through both community programs and direct officer engagement, is key to long-term, sustainable dog management before a dog is declared.

Other matters

Moirā Shire Council's commitment to animal welfare during emergencies is a significant strength of its broader emergency management approach. The development and annual review of the Emergency Animal Welfare Plan, endorsed in 2019, demonstrates proactive planning and a clear recognition of the importance of including animals in disaster preparedness and response. As a sub-plan to the Municipal Emergency Management Plan, it ensures animals are not an afterthought, but a core consideration in community resilience.

The inclusion of media and education strategies is another positive step, helping pet owners understand their responsibilities and prepare for emergencies. By providing practical guidance—such as what supplies pets need, the importance of identification, and how to manage veterinary needs, council is actively supporting both animal safety and owner preparedness. This approach not only improves outcomes during disasters but also strengthens community trust in council's animal welfare leadership.

Best wishes,

Jacquie

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