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Submission to Macedon Ranges Shire for the 2026-2030 Domestic Animal Management Plan

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) is a peak research body that advocates 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.

You can read more about us and our vision on our website: <https://petwelfare.org.au>.

It is appropriate that that Macedon Ranges Shire Council is actively consulting the community on matters relating to domestic animals, recognising the importance of incorporating public input into policy development. Gaining an understanding of key community concerns, such as responsible pet ownership, protection of wildlife, management of off-leash areas, and animal welfare, is essential to informing a balanced and effective Domestic Animal Management Plan (DAMP). However, the current approach, which limits feedback to a structured survey without the opportunity to elaborate on responses, may constrain the depth and quality of insights gathered.

Given that the results of this consultation will shape the new DAMP, it is vital to provide avenues for more nuanced feedback. With no number of survey respondents for the prior plan, the scope of community input is limited, highlighting the need for more comprehensive engagement. Enabling residents to expand on their views would support a more inclusive and representative planning process and help ensure greater transparency in how community feedback informs the final strategy. Survey responses can be manipulated to get outcomes desired by councils; therefore, this feedback is based on the 2021-2025 Domestic Animal Management Plan.

Evaluation of animal control services provided by the Council

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) strongly supports Council's vision and guiding principles for animal management over the next four years. Recognising the positive impact pets have on human wellbeing is an essential foundation for inclusive policy, and we commend council's commitment to supporting the bond between people and their animals. The balanced approach, considering the needs of pet owners, non-pet owners, and the environment, demonstrates a thoughtful and responsible strategy. APWF also welcomes the focus on animal welfare assist and support programs, responsible ownership, as well as Council's intention to collaborate with community groups and agencies. These partnerships are vital for achieving long-term, sustainable outcomes for people, pets, and local ecosystems.

Training of authorised officers

Macedon Ranges Shire Council demonstrates a clear commitment to the ongoing training and development of its Authorised Officers, ensuring they are equipped to effectively enforce the Domestic Animals Act 1994. Officers work across both rural and urban areas and require strong knowledge of multiple legislative frameworks. Training extends beyond enforcement to include skills in community engagement, conflict resolution, animal welfare assessment, and public education, ensuring officers can perform their duties effectively while maintaining community trust.

A key strength of the Council's program is its tailored approach to officer development, underpinned by mandated annual performance reviews. Training needs are assessed individually and incorporated into development plans, acknowledging that each team has unique strengths and areas for growth. The wide range of training, covering essential skills such as mental health first aid, self-defence, and recognising signs of abuse toward both people and animals, reflects council's understanding of the diverse capabilities required for the role. This approach not only supports best practice in animal management and welfare but also strengthens officers' ability to respond compassionately and effectively in complex situations. Council's commitment to maintaining current industry memberships and providing access to relevant resources further reinforces a culture of excellence and accountability.

To encourage the registration and identification of dogs and cats

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) commends Macedon Ranges Shire Council for its proactive approach to reuniting lost pets with their owners. The focus on direct return through registration and microchipping is a highly effective

strategy that benefits both animals and the community. Minimising the need for impoundment reduces stress on animals, limits potential risks to public safety, and supports positive welfare outcomes. We acknowledge the value of Council officers' efforts to return pets in the field and the use of a local holding facility as a practical and compassionate measure.

Council's proactive initiatives, such as reduced registration fees for adopted pets, free first-year registration for desexed cats, inclusion of pet information in new resident kits, and convenient online registration options, demonstrate a strong commitment to encouraging responsible pet ownership and increasing compliance.

While dog registration rates remain strong across the Shire, APWF notes that cat registration continues to lag significantly behind, a trend that aligns with low reclaim rates for cats seen more broadly across Victoria. Given that many impounded cats are friendly but go unclaimed, we encourage Council to explore additional strategies to improve cat registration. These may include enhanced community assistance and support, broader promotion of registration incentives, removing barriers and targeted outreach in areas with lower compliance. Increasing cat registration is vital for improving reunification outcomes and ensuring a consistent standard of care for all companion animals in the municipality.

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

Cat Containment

The APWF strongly recommends keeping cats contained indoors at night, and during the day, if possible, on their owners' property in a comfortable environment that meets their physical and mental needs. However, the **APWF is against mandated cat containment** (night curfews and 24/7) because it results in increased cat-related complaints, impoundments, and euthanasia, as well as higher costs and enforcement difficulties for local governments. Additionally, mandated cat containment fails to reduce the overall number of wandering cats in the short and long term, both in Australia and internationally, and is a barrier to solving the free-roaming cat problem.

Cat containment mandates are unlikely to ever be successful in achieving their intended outcomes. For such policies to work, clear and measurable goals, such as reducing roaming cats, nuisance complaints, or wildlife predation, must be

established. However, the core challenges lie in identifying the true source of the problem and addressing it effectively. Free-roaming and nuisance cats are most

prevalent in disadvantaged areas, where many of the cats are semi-owned or unidentified and owned by individuals facing barriers to compliance. Mandated containment fails to account for these realities and will not lead to meaningful change, as the majority of free-roaming cats in these areas are not identifiable or easily regulated through containment laws.

Secondly, many disadvantaged residents simply have no ability to comply, and therefore mandated containment becomes a social justice issue. In areas where free-roaming cats are most numerous and problematic, many residents live in low-cost rental properties that have inadequate fencing for cat containment and may have no screens on windows and doors or air-conditioning. Containment fencing is often in the range of \$700 to \$2000 or more and is simply not affordable for community members to comply with cat containment mandates. Unfortunately, no subsidy is available to encourage their purchase, and cheaper options, such as PVC pipe installations, may require specific skills that some individuals do not possess. Additionally, many community members live in apartment blocks without access to a yard, leaving them with only communal spaces where they cannot put an enclosure. This is particularly common in social housing, where residents may not have flyscreens on windows and, therefore, cannot physically contain their cats, and fencing is inadequate to fit even inexpensive PVC tubing.

Promoting simple low or minimum cost solutions such as bed-time feeding is likely to get more compliance, especially effective night-time compliance. Night-time containment is effective at protecting vulnerable wildlife, because it is a time when cats and threatened and endangered species most susceptible to cat predation (nocturnal mammals such as gliders and phascogales) are most likely to interact.

Bedtime feeding of cats is recommended as a highly effective way to assist cat owners at minimal to no additional cost to keep owned pet cats safely inside at night and prevent potential wildlife predation and nuisance behaviours such as fighting. This involves feeding cats inside at bedtime and ensuring all doors and windows are shut for the night, providing many owners with a way to safely confine their cat in the house/dwelling overnight. Bed-time feeding should be widely promoted to raise awareness among cat owners to increase cat containment at night, however, containment should not be made mandatory. This is because containment may not be achievable, for example for owners with no air-conditioning and inadequate screening on windows and doors, and no suitable secure area.

In addition, **mandating containment leads to increased costs and enforcement difficulties for local governments** and other unintended negative consequences including severe mental health impacts on community residents and staff associated with euthanising healthy cats and kittens. Mandated cat containment

also **prevents the resolution of the problem of wandering cats** by creating a significant obstacle for cat semi-owners to take full ownership of the stray cats they are feeding.

Mandating cat confinement creates a false hope within the community that the problems will be fixed once implemented and enforced. However, enforcement cannot occur when there is no owner for a cat, and effective enforcement requires an owner to be issued with the infringement or notice. In the relatively few cases where an owner or semi-owner is identified, they often have no ability to comply. Infringements

issued by the council noncompliance can further financially burden cat owners without achieving containment.

Mandating cat containment is seen as a popular solution to the free-roaming cat and nuisance problem. However, this is because the community does not understand the cause of the problem (low socioeconomic, semi-owned and unidentified owned cats), nor do they understand the adverse impacts of such a program on staff mental health and job satisfaction, nuisance complaints and costs to councils and welfare agencies. They also do not understand that evidence from Victoria demonstrates they are not effective, while microtargeted desexing programs are successful at reducing the problem.

The expansion of local cat confinement laws will not solve the issue of semi-owned and stray domestic cats, as has been shown in previous instances such as Yarra Ranges Council and Casey Council (further details at [APWF 2023](#)). Furthermore, some councils have produced reports stating that curfews are unenforceable (Hobsons Bay Council, Hume City Council). In the City of Yarra Ranges (Victoria), in the 3rd year after mandating 24/7 cat containment, cat-related complaints increased by 143%. Yarra Ranges Council acknowledged that the significant increase in cat complaints was likely the result of the introduction of a 24-hour cat curfew in 2014. In addition, impoundments increased by 68%, and euthanasia increased by 18% (human population only increased by 2%) (Yarra Ranges 2021).

In the City of Casey (Victoria), 20 years after introducing mandated 24/7 cat containment, the number of cats impounded was still 296% higher than baseline (from 264 cats in 1998 to 1,047 cats in 2019/20), more than double the rate of the human population increase. In 2000, Casey received 349 cat nuisance and related complaints which had increased to 376 complaints in 2020/2021 (Casey Council 2001 & 2021a, b)([APWF 2023](#)) Therefore, mandated containment is not effective over 3 years or 20 years in reducing complaints associated with free-roaming cats, cat impoundments and therefore costs to councils.

This failure reflects the impracticality for carers of semi-owned or stray cats to contain cats, and the financial and logistical barriers faced by cat residents in disadvantaged urban environments including in social housing. Therefore, it is

important to consider alternative solutions that are both effective and feasible for all community members. **We recommend a more nuanced approach** that includes supporting the construction of affordable and simple cat enclosures and exploring subsidies for those in need and promoting bedtime feeding where feasible.

While the State Government encourages councils to implement mandated cat containment laws, **there is currently no evidence demonstrating that these measures effectively reduce roaming cat numbers**. Such laws also fail to adequately address the challenges posed by semi-owned or unowned cats, and do not appear to significantly reduce related complaints to councils. Other Victorian councils have rejected implementing the 24/7 cat containment mandates, as they believe this further disadvantages community who are already struggling financially and these laws are unenforceable (Hume Council, Bayside Council, Geelong Council, City of Melbourne, Hobsons Bay).

Although Macedon Ranges Shire currently has a sunset-to-sunrise curfew for cats, **it is strongly recommended that a 24/7 curfew not be introduced**, as the effectiveness and enforceability of such measures remain questionable.

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

APWF acknowledges council's commitment to rehoming unclaimed animals and its success in maintaining high rehoming rates and low euthanasia rates. The gradual improvement in cat rehoming and euthanasia outcomes is encouraging, and we strongly support the proposal to introduce a Council-subsidised low-cost desexing program for cats. Addressing the overpopulation of cats, particularly unowned community cats, requires sustained and proactive intervention, and such programs are a critical step in reducing intake numbers and improving outcomes for feline welfare in the region. While dog overpopulation appears to be less of a concern, ongoing attention to compliance and welfare issues remains important.

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 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.

Community Cat Programs

The APWF supports the expansion of innovative desexing initiatives such as that implemented in the city of Banyule, Ipswich Council QLD, RSPCA NSW (Cotterell 2024, Rand 2024, RSPCA NSW 2023). These programs must include clearly defined, measurable objectives over 3–5 years and be targeted to suburbs with high shelter intakes or cat-related complaints. Within these areas, microtargeting specific streets or neighbourhoods where cats are most at risk of impoundment or surrender ensures greater impact. Effective programs also require sufficient intensity, desexing 30 cats

per 1,000 residents annually in targeted suburbs or 10 per 1,000 with microtargeting, otherwise objectives are unlikely to be achieved.

Strong local partnerships are essential for success. Collaborating with veterinarians and welfare agencies can expand low-cost or free desexing, particularly for people who cannot access or afford private clinics. Programs should be adapted to local needs and barriers. A limiting factor is veterinary capacity, which constrains broader rollout. High-volume clinics offering early age desexing should be supported, and animal welfare agencies encouraged, potentially funded, to develop such facilities for public access. Effective cat management requires coordinated community-wide efforts and cannot rely on a single agency.

Cat impoundments are highest in low-income regional areas (Chua 2023, Albertson 2016), where veterinary services may be inaccessible. These regions need affordable desexing options. Mobile clinics could service towns without a vet, including farming communities. Desexing and transport services should be supported by partnerships with local veterinary practices.

To reduce unwanted cats, economic barriers to desexing must be addressed, particularly for low-income households or to assist residents with financial stress. This requires affordable programs and grants targeted to vulnerable Victorians. Success depends on microtargeting based on data from cat-related calls and impoundments. Positive, assistive AMO engagement with people who own entire cats, especially those experiencing disadvantage, is essential. The Banyule model (Cotterell 2024) demonstrates how such engagement in disadvantaged areas can reduce shelter intake and euthanasia.

Many cat carers struggle, especially during the current cost-of-living crisis, cannot afford desexing—especially when managing multiple cats. These individuals require fully subsidised or very low-cost services. Council grants to enable AMOs to facilitate desexing for such cases would be highly effective. Transport assistance may also be required, and using AMOs to support transport to surgery is a more constructive use of their time than impoundment.

While general desexing promotion is helpful, **programs not targeted to those most in need may have limited impact** (Frank 2007), often subsidising those who would have desexed their pets anyway. It is essential that programs are place-based, microtargeted to areas of need, and free from access barriers such as requiring pension or concession cards. Vouchers for local clinics may not be effective due to vet shortages and rising service costs. Based on RSPCA NSW experience (Ma 2023), only **half of participants in microtargeted programs held benefits cards**, highlighting that many who need help fall outside traditional criteria.

To properly address the issue of cat overpopulation, partnerships with the community and other stakeholders must be formed to develop community-based solutions that are microtargeted to locations most needed. The APWF fully supports place-based cat desexing programs. Microtargeting the suburbs with the highest nuisance cat-related calls and cat impoundments is one crucial element of these programs; the second component, just as crucial, is outreach provided within the community by those operating the programs.

Most **semi-owners caring for 1 to 2 cats will take ownership of the cat/s** they are caring for if free desexing, microchipping and registration is provided. It is not lack of education, it is lack of resources that are the barrier to desexing. The top 5 reasons semi-owners took ownership of a cat when free desexing for it was available were: desexing was free, they did not want the cat to have kittens, to stop unwanted or annoying behaviours, it was good for the cat, and they wanted to do the right thing (Crawford 2023). Note that mandated containment is a barrier to semi-owners taking ownership, as are 2 cat limits.

Promoting targeted Community Cat Programs in 'hot spots' with high unowned and semi-owned cat populations and disadvantaged individuals needing assistance mainly relies on local knowledge of council officers. The **“red flag cat model”** (microtargeting) assumes that one free-roaming cat causing a nuisance there are likely be more cats in this location, and that AMOs should target these areas (Spehar and Wolf 2019).

Subsidised desexing Vs Targeted Free Desexing

Subsidised desexing programs, while helpful, often primarily attract pet owners who were already planning to desex their animals, acting more as a **cost-saving substitution rather than shifting behaviour**. These programs tend to reach those who are proactive about pet care but are simply seeking a more affordable option.

In contrast, **free desexing programs combined with targeted community outreach have proven far more effective** at reaching individuals who would not otherwise desex their pets at all. By removing financial and logistical barriers and engaging directly with communities, particularly in disadvantaged areas, these initiatives

capture a harder-to-reach group, including owners of semi-owned or unowned animals. This approach results in a much greater overall impact on reducing unwanted litters and managing free-roaming cat populations, which reduce intake.

Community Cat Programs play a vital role in humane, effective urban cat management by focusing on **the real source of cat-related issues, domestic cats that are owned, semi-owned, or unowned, rather than truly feral animals**. Best practice recognises that nearly all cats found in urban areas fall within the Domestic category, even if they are frightened or unsocialised when impounded. Misclassifying these cats as "feral" risks unnecessary euthanasia and undermines the potential for rehabilitation, fostering, and rehoming. By accurately identifying cats and directing targeted desexing and outreach efforts, particularly in areas with high complaint rates or economic disadvantage.

Community Cat Programs can dramatically reduce shelter intake, euthanasia, and nuisance complaints. Evidence from successful initiatives like Banyule, RSPCA NSW, and APWF microtargeted program shows that with the right approach, councils can achieve substantial welfare gains and cost savings without resorting to enforcement or containment laws.

Domestic Animal Businesses

Macedon Ranges Shire Council's proactive approach to supporting Domestic Animal Businesses (DABs) offers significant benefits for animal welfare and community trust. The annual self-assessment tool empowers proprietors to review their own compliance, encouraging accountability and early issue identification. Combined with regular audits and ongoing engagement from Local Laws Officers, this approach promotes a clear understanding of legal obligations and fosters a culture of continuous improvement. Additionally, targeted enforcement against illegal breeding and unregistered businesses helps protect animals and maintains the integrity of local operations.

Other matters

Pets in Emergencies

The APWF **commends Macedon Ranges Shire Council for recognising the vital role pets play in the wellbeing of individuals and families**, particularly during times of crisis. The acknowledgement that pets provide physical, emotional, and social support is an important step toward inclusive and compassionate emergency planning. Council's efforts to work with emergency services, family violence networks, and health providers **to ensure people can remain with their pets**, or know they are safely cared for, demonstrate a thoughtful and humane approach to community resilience. This is



especially important where separation from a companion animal during emergencies can cause significant distress and deter people from seeking help or evacuating safely.

Other strategies include free behaviour counselling services, funding assistance with veterinary health care costs, temporary boarding of pets during times of personal crises, food banks, training classes, and public education campaigns. These are components of 'Pets for Life programs', implemented by Humane World for Animals, to keep people and pets together (Humane World for Animals 2025).

APWF strongly supports the continued development of council's Emergency Animal Plan and its initiatives to provide temporary boarding, transport, and veterinary support for pets during crises. These services play a critical role in keeping people and their pets together, helping reduce the trauma of emergencies and enabling residents to prioritise their safety and recovery. We also endorse the inclusion of pet-related support in family violence and independent living programs, as these services are essential for ensuring vulnerable members of the community are not forced to choose between their well-being and the welfare of their animals.

If you have further questions regarding this submission, please do not hesitate to contact us at info@petwelfare.org.au

Best wishes,

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