

7 April 2025

## **Submission to Maroondah City Council- Domestic Animal Management Plan 2026-2029**

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 a current AVA member.

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

### **Executive summary**

The **Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF)** is dedicated to improving pet welfare through evidence-based programs that reduce overpopulation, increase pet retention, and support effective animal management policies. Key focus areas include training Animal Management Officers in humane and effective handling, promoting responsible pet ownership through education and accessible vet care, and implementing targeted desexing programs to address overpopulation and reduce euthanasia rates. The APWF advocates for improved policies that remove financial and administrative barriers to microchipping and registration, making it more accessible for all pet owners. Additionally, the foundation supports community-based solutions for managing nuisance complaints and proactive strategies to prevent dog attacks. Australian Pet Welfare Foundation promotes behaviour-based assessments and responsible ownership measures as more effective approaches for managing dangerous or restricted breed dogs.



Additionally, APWF advocates for stronger regulations to prevent the unregulated giveaway of "free to good home" litters, which frequently contribute to overpopulation and higher shelter intake. We also urge councils to implement proactive desexing programs to support the community and reduce the need for these giveaways.

Broader policy recommendations include pet-friendly rental laws, increased access to veterinary care for low-income families, and legislative changes to protect community cats. Our foundation emphasizes the need for greater transparency from councils in reporting all statistics, including shelter intake, euthanasia rates, compliance with desexing and registration laws, and the enforcement of cat containment laws, such as number of infringements and notices issued and for non-compliance. Transparent reporting and annual reviews of animal management programs are essential to measuring their effectiveness and ensuring continuous improvement and should be kept updated annually on council's website. Australian Pet Welfare Foundation collaborates with local governments, animal welfare organizations, and policymakers to develop and implement effective strategies that prevent unnecessary euthanasia of healthy or treatable pets.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback on the Maroondah City Council Draft Domestic Animal Management Plan 2026-2029.

## **Evaluation of animal control services provided by the Council**

Maroondah City Council's continued commitment to delivering domestic animal management services is commendable, particularly through the retention and application of four guiding principles. These principles demonstrate a thoughtful, balanced approach that recognises both the legal responsibilities and the emotional and social value of pet ownership. The emphasis on strengthening relationships with pet owners and the broader community (Principle 1) is especially positive. By seeking to work in partnership during times of crisis and supporting community-based pet initiatives, Council fosters a compassionate, inclusive approach that recognises pets as part of the social fabric. Likewise, Principle 4 reflects a strong understanding of the role pets play in residents' lives, ensuring that policies are developed with empathy and respect.

A notable strength is the Council's effort to align legal obligations (Principle 2) with evolving community expectations, highlighting the benefits of pet ownership while still advocating for compliance. This dual approach supports both enforcement and education, which is critical for effective and fair animal management. However, while the principles are well-rounded, some areas may benefit from more detailed planning around implementation, particularly regarding how support will be delivered to pet owners facing financial or housing-related barriers to compliance. For instance, Principle 3 places responsibility solely on pet owners, which is appropriate in many cases, but additional clarity around how the Council will assist vulnerable pet owners

could strengthen the equity of this framework. Overall, Maroondah’s principles provide a strong foundation for humane, effective domestic animal management, with an opportunity to further enhance outcomes through targeted support and engagement strategies. The Maroondah DAMP is the only plan with the forethought to implement “Animal Management Principals”, which is fantastic.

## **Training of authorised officers**

It's great to see that Maroondah Council actively seeks community feedback on the performance of their animal management officers. While the results show room for improvement, the commitment to transparency and community input is a positive step toward building trust and strengthening service delivery.

Maroondah City Council’s commitment to ongoing training for its Local Laws team is a clear strength of the DAMP. Regular training in customer service, conflict resolution, and public communication helps ensure officers are equipped to interact safely and respectfully with the community. Participation in industry workshops and the maintenance of a staff training register also support professional development and operational consistency.

However, previous community feedback highlights a gap in awareness, with only 29% agreeing officers are responsive and 26% finding them knowledgeable. The high number of “not applicable” responses suggests limited engagement or visibility of the service. This presents an opportunity for Council to improve communication and increase public understanding of the role and training of animal management officers. Enhancing visibility through community outreach and education could strengthen trust and help residents better appreciate the value of the service being provided.

## **Programs to promote and encourage responsible ownership of dogs and cats**

Maroondah City Council’s approach to promoting responsible pet ownership is thoughtful and well-structured, with a strong emphasis on education, communication, and community engagement. It’s encouraging to see that the Council not only focuses on enforcement but also acknowledges its important role in supporting positive and informed relationships between people and their pets. This aligns with broader community trends showing that Australians increasingly view their pets as family members, making education and support more relevant than ever.

A key strength is the planned development of a comprehensive communication program to raise awareness of animal management services and responsible pet ownership. The proposal to use a wide range of channels—including social media, printed materials, videos, and even footpath stencilling—demonstrates a creative and

inclusive approach. Importantly, the plan also acknowledges the need for accessible information, including translations into other languages, and targets new pet owners.

The Council's commitment to working with schools is another positive, helping to shape attitudes from a young age through programs like 'Living Safely with Dogs' and 'Pet Town.' Engaging children and families builds long-term understanding and respect for animals, contributing to safer, happier communities.

However, while the actions are commendable, the strategy would benefit from more detail on how outcomes will be measured beyond implementation milestones. For example, tracking community awareness or behaviour change over time could help demonstrate real impact. Additionally, more emphasis on reaching disadvantaged or hard-to-reach pet owners would ensure the programs are truly inclusive and equitable. Additionally, the focus on encouraging adoption from shelters and challenging negative perceptions about shelter animals demonstrates a welfare-focused mindset.

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

Maroondah City Council's focus on minimising the risk of dog attacks is both necessary and appropriate, given the serious consequences such incidents can have for people, animals, and community confidence. A key strength is Council's recognition that dog aggression is a complex issue influenced by a variety of factors beyond breed alone, including early socialisation, training, health, and human behaviour. This aligns with expert advice and moves away from outdated assumptions that certain breeds are solely to blame. The commitment to investigating all reports of dog attacks promptly to reduce risk is also commendable, demonstrating a strong sense of accountability and public safety.

However, there are a few areas that could be strengthened. While enforcement and investigation are important, there appears to be less emphasis on preventative education for dog owners and the broader community. The plan would benefit from clearer strategies around behaviour change, such as widespread education on dog body language, child safety around dogs, and responsible use of off-leash areas. Additionally, there is limited mention of collaboration with veterinarians, trainers, or behaviourists, who could play a key role in reducing aggression through early intervention and support. A more balanced approach that integrates education, community engagement, and enforcement would likely be more effective long term.

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

### **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.

## Community Cat Programs

The APWF supports the expansion of innovative desexing initiatives such as that implemented in the city of Banyule (Cotterell 2024). 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 in Community Cat Programs. 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. Alternatively, transporting cats up to two hours to a clinic is safe and commonly practised in remote areas of the USA. 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 undesexed 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.

Addressing cat overpopulation effectively requires community partnerships and tailored, microtargeted responses. The APWF strongly supports place-based desexing programs that combine suburb-level targeting based on nuisance cat reports and impoundments, with local outreach by program staff. This dual approach—targeting where the problem is greatest and providing direct support to residents—offers the best chance for lasting, measurable impact on cat overpopulation and welfare.

## **To encourage the registration and identification of dogs and cats**

Maroondah City Council's continued advocacy for systemic improvements in microchipping and pet registration is a strong and forward-thinking element of the DAMP. Supporting the development of a single national microchip and registration database would significantly improve reunification outcomes for lost pets and streamline animal management processes across jurisdictions. Likewise, advocating for reduced registration fees for dogs that have been adopted or undergone training promotes responsible pet ownership and encourages positive behaviours. These efforts reflect a progressive stance and a willingness to push for broader legislative and policy reforms that benefit both pet owners and the community.

On the other hand, while these advocacy and monitoring actions are commendable, their success largely depends on external decision-makers and funding, which may limit short-term impact. The plan would benefit from clearer local strategies that can be implemented independently of state or federal support. For example, while there is mention of exploring desexing and microchipping initiatives, the commitment to specific programs or timelines is vague and dependent on funding availability. Greater

emphasis on partnerships with local veterinary clinics or animal welfare organisations could help deliver some of these initiatives more reliably. Additionally, improving data collection is important, but the current strategy could be strengthened by specifying how the data will be used to inform targeted interventions or evaluate existing efforts.

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

Maroondah City Council has shown a commendable commitment to understanding and addressing the nuisance impacts of companion animals through its comprehensive approach in the Domestic Animal Management Plan (DAMP). While the overall reduction in animal-related complaints from 2017 to 2021 is a positive trend, community feedback underscores that nuisance behaviours, such as barking dogs, off-leash aggression, dog waste, and free-roaming cats, continue to impact public amenity. These statistics are not updated annually in the review and are not published annually on the website.

The plan includes well-considered actions to tackle these issues, including better resources for barking dog complaints, increased patrols in high-complaint parks, partnership opportunities with dog trainers, and infrastructure reviews related to dog waste management. However, it is important to note a key limitation: cat curfews, even when legislated, cannot be enforced on unowned or semi-owned cats. As shown in [Cotterell et al. \(2024\)](#), most nuisance cats are not truly “owned” in the traditional sense—many are semi-owned or stray, particularly in lower socioeconomic areas. In these areas, enforcement-based containment policies have proven ineffective, and trapping alone has historically failed to reduce cat-related complaints.

Instead, the research highlights that microtargeted, community-supported desexing programs offer a practical and compassionate alternative. In the city of Banyule, a free sterilisation, microchipping, and registration program for owned and semi-owned cats resulted in a 66% drop in impoundments, 82% drop in euthanasia, and 36% reduction in cat-related calls across eight years. The program effectively turned semi-owned cats into identified, sterilised pets, helping to reduce the root causes of nuisance complaints.

Maroondah Council could benefit from incorporating similar proactive strategies, which not only reduce complaints and impoundments but also improve community welfare outcomes and lessen psychological strain on enforcement staff and animal care workers at Animal Aid.

## **Mandated Cat Containment**

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) strongly supports keeping cats safely contained at night, within their owner’s property in a comfortable and enriched environment. However, APWF **does not support mandated cat containment**, such as

24/7 confinement or night curfews—due to significant evidence showing these approaches are ineffective, expensive to enforce, and can lead to negative animal welfare outcomes.

Mandated containment often increases cat-related complaints, impoundments, and euthanasia, while placing financial pressure on local councils. Critically, containment laws fail to reduce the number of free-roaming cats, particularly in disadvantaged areas where most nuisance cats are semi-owned or unidentified. In these locations, compliance is unrealistic for many residents who live in low-cost rentals, apartments, or social housing without secure outdoor areas or adequate home infrastructure. Enclosures can cost \$700–\$2000, making them inaccessible for many.

Cat curfews also create enforcement challenges. Unowned or semi-owned cats cannot be linked to a specific person, making infringements unenforceable. Where owners are identified, they often cannot afford to comply, and penalties can worsen financial stress without improving outcomes. Mandated laws can also discourage semi-owners from taking responsibility for cats they care for, preventing desexing and identification.

Evidence from Victoria supports these concerns. After Yarra Ranges Council introduced 24/7 cat containment, cat-related complaints rose by 143%, impoundments by 68%, and euthanasia by 18%. In Casey, impoundments were still 296% above baseline after 20 years of containment laws, with complaints continuing to rise. These cases highlight the failure of mandatory approaches to reduce cat nuisance or shelter intake.

Instead, APWF recommends promoting low-cost, voluntary strategies such as **bedtime feeding**, which encourages owners to bring cats inside at night by feeding them and closing doors and windows. This is an effective, low-cost method that protects wildlife and reduces nuisance behaviours like fighting and roaming. Promoting night-time containment, without mandating it, is more likely to succeed—especially when supported by practical, accessible information and resources.

A more effective long-term solution involves community-based, microtargeted desexing programs that support low-income pet owners and semi-owners. In the city of Banyule, such a program desexed semi-owned and owned cats in high-need areas, resulting in a 66% reduction in impoundments, 82% reduction in euthanasia, and a 36% drop in cat-related complaints. These outcomes demonstrate that proactive, supportive approaches are far more effective than punitive ones.

To genuinely reduce free-roaming cat numbers, we need solutions that are feasible for all community members. APWF recommends a combination of promoting bedtime feeding, exploring subsidies for affordable enclosures, and implementing targeted desexing programs. These strategies offer a more compassionate, inclusive, and effective path forward. Please read more on our position statement and key issues on cat containment [Cat Containment: Position on Safe Pet Management - APWF](#)

## **Dangerous, Menacing and Restricted breed dogs**

Maroondah City Council's efforts to manage dangerous, menacing, and restricted breed dogs are an essential part of maintaining community safety and upholding responsibilities under the Domestic Animals Act (DAA). The significant reduction in the number of declared dogs since 2017 suggests that education and proactive enforcement may already be having a positive effect. Ensuring that owners of declared dogs are fully informed of their legal obligations—and conducting regular inspections to confirm compliance—helps protect the wider community and supports responsible pet ownership. The Council's approach also acknowledges that any dog, regardless of breed, has the potential to display aggressive behaviour, and highlights the importance of owner behaviour, training, and control.

Proactively addressing issues as they occur, such as dogs wandering or being off-leash inappropriately can prevent behavioural incidents from escalating into serious attacks, which may otherwise result in a dog being declared dangerous or menacing. Prior community feedback indicates frustration with uncontrolled and aggressive dogs in public areas, further reinforcing the need for early intervention.

## **Other matters**

This section of the DAMP is a standout example of forward-thinking and compassionate governance. The recognition of pets as critical supports in times of crisis—particularly for victims of domestic violence—is backed by strong evidence and clearly aligned with community values. It's incredibly positive to see that 87% of the community identified the welfare of animals in domestic violence situations as important or very important. By acknowledging this and taking meaningful action in partnership with Animal Aid and EDVOS, Maroondah City Council is demonstrating leadership in addressing both human and animal welfare.

The proposed actions—such as training Animal Management Officers on emerging risks, developing emergency accommodation policies for pets, and maintaining emergency management plans—highlight a deep understanding of the complex intersection between pets, health, housing, and safety. The collaboration with community partners is commendable and shows a commitment to real, practical solutions rather than surface-level responses. Encouraging other Council service areas to include pets in broader wellbeing strategies, such as Active Ageing and pet therapy, further reinforces the important role animals play in social connection and mental health. Overall, this is a progressive and deeply thoughtful set of initiatives that places Maroondah at the forefront of inclusive and responsive animal management planning.

If you would like any further information regarding this submission, please contact [info@petwelfare.org.au](mailto:info@petwelfare.org.au)

Best wishes,

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