

WA Cat Act Review

Overall position

- Western Australia should modernise the Cat Act as a prevention and support framework, rather than relying primarily on punitive compliance.
- The Act should make responsible cat management achievable through free and low-cost sterilisation, microchipping, practical assistance, clear definitions and public reporting.
- Strong positions to consider include abolishing cat registration, removing punitive mandatory sterilisation, not introducing mandated containment or cat limits, and funding targeted Community Cat Programs.

Key points to include

- Make compliance achievable before using penalties, especially for low-income owners, renters, elderly people and people caring for semi-owned cats.
- Prioritise prevention by funding free and low-cost sterilisation and microchipping in suburbs with high cat intake, unwanted litters and complaints.
- Use microchipping, scanning and updated contact details as the main identification system, rather than relying on registration or physical tags.
- Regulate deliberate breeding for sale, but help people with accidental litters through a last-litter sterilisation and rehoming pathway.
- Require councils and shelters to publish annual data so the community can see whether cat laws and programs are reducing intake, euthanasia and complaints.
- Protect wildlife through targeted, evidence-based reduction in free-roaming cat numbers, while publicly funding protective measures where threatened species occur in urban areas.
- Do not implement mandated containment - it is a social justice issue for disadvantaged cat owners and renters, it's a barrier for cat caregivers adopting stray cats, and it does not solve the problem of free-roaming cats because most are not owned, and it does not decrease complaints, impoundments or euthanasia.
- Do not implement cat-limits - it's a barrier for cat caregivers adopting stray cats.
- Use RSPCA recommended definitions of domestic and feral cats. Stray cats should not be considered feral cats.

Executive summary

Support a practical, humane and evidence-based Cat Act that reduces breeding, improves identification, decreases pound and shelter intake, reduces euthanasia and supports better outcomes for cats, people, councils, veterinary teams and wildlife.

- Use clear cat definitions. Domestic cats are cats living where people live or frequent and relying directly or indirectly on people for food; feral cats live and reproduce in areas remote from humans and do not depend on people for food (RSPCA Australia, 2018).
- Shift from a punitive model to an assistance-first model. Councils should provide information, support, affordable sterilization and microchipping and amnesty options before issuing penalties.
- Fund targeted Community Cat Programs in areas with high cat intake, unwanted litters and complaints. Australian programs have shown reductions in cat intake, euthanasia, complaints, free-roaming cats and council costs (Cotterell et al., 2024; Rand et al., 2024a; Ma et al., 2026).
- Require transparent annual reporting by local governments and shelters on cat intake, outcomes, complaints, program expenditure and enforcement activity, modelled on Victoria's public reporting approach (Agriculture Victoria, 2026).

- Do not introduce mandated cat containment, but encourage containment where possible, with information on low-cost and practical containment methods. Paradoxically, mandated containment is a barrier to reducing the number of free-roaming cats.
- Mandated cat containment is a barrier to reducing the number of free-roaming cats because most are unidentified stray cats being fed by carers. Taking ownership of the cat, microchipping and sterilizing it will help to reduce unwanted kittens being born to become stray, but may immediately result in them breaking the law.
- Mandated cat containment is also a social justice issue because for low-income cat owners, particularly renters, residential properties rarely have cat-secure perimeter fencing or nor are suitable for indoor containment. Window screens may not be intact, and air-conditioners may not be present or be affordable to use. On low incomes, containment systems are unaffordable. Enforcement of containment may result in cat owners having to surrender their cat. For socially isolated people, particularly the aged, this may be their only companion.
- Preliminary data demonstrate that Victorian containment mandates have not shown measurable benefits for complaints, impoundments or euthanasia, with socioeconomic conditions and whether the council is a metropolitan or rural city explaining all the differences between councils (Cotterell 2025b, Cotterell et al., 2026, unpublished data).
- Do not introduce cat limits (usually 2-4 cats without a permit) – use local laws designed to address nuisance issues and state animal welfare laws if appropriate.
- **Compliance, impoundments and euthanasia rates all reflect socioeconomic disadvantage.**

1. Registration, microchipping and identification

The Act should retain mandatory microchipping but strengthen it as a reunification and population-management tool. Microchipping should be required by four months of age, and all cats entering councils, pounds, shelters, veterinary clinics and rescue groups should be scanned at first contact and again before rehoming, transfer or euthanasia.

- Microchipping substantially improves the chance that a lost cat can be returned to an owner, but only if contact details are current. In RSPCA Queensland data, 61% of microchipped cats were reclaimed compared with 5% of non-microchipped cats, while incorrect or outdated records reduced return-to-owner outcomes (Lancaster et al., 2015).
- Microchip databases registering cats from WA should be required to send SMS or email reminders every three to six months so owners can update their details (Goodwin et al., 2018).
- Cat registration should be abolished. It adds a financial and administrative barrier, has low compliance, and may discourage microchipping because databases can be used to identify unpaid registration fees.
- If registration is retained, it should be free or very low-cost, ideally lifetime registration for sterilised and microchipped cats assisted through approved community programs.
- Physical tags should be encouraged but not required as an offence. Microchipping should be the primary form of identification.

2. Sterilisation

Sterilisation should remain a central cat population-management tool, but punitive mandatory sterilisation should be replaced by accessible, early-age, targeted programs. The main barrier to sterilisation is affordability and access to veterinary care, not lack of motivation; household income is a major predictor of sterilisation status (Chu et al., 2009).

- Support sterilisation by four months of age, combined with microchipping, through free and low-cost programs in areas with high cat intake, complaints and unwanted litters.
- Remove punitive mandatory sterilisation requirements because mandates have not been shown to reduce cat intake or reliably increase sterilisation compliance. States with sterilisation-before-sale-or-transfer requirements recorded higher per-capita cat admission rates than states without those mandates (Chua et al., 2023).
- Make compliance achievable through practical assistance, transport to veterinary services, caregiver engagement and amnesty pathways.

- Recognise that many cats entering pounds and shelters are unidentified owned, semi-owned or unowned domestic cats, so enforcement is rarely successful (Alberthsen et al., 2016; Chua et al., 2023).

3. Breeding

Breeder approval should be retained for intentional, repeated and commercial breeding, but the Act should not treat accidental litters, cat carers or community carers as deliberate breeders.

- Require approved breeders selling cats or kittens to comply with traceability and welfare standards, including microchip numbers, breeder approval numbers, accurate records and enforceable welfare requirements.
- Require online platforms to include mandatory microchip-number and breeder-approval fields for cats and kittens advertised for sale.
- Create a non-punitive “last litter” pathway for accidental litters. Where a person seeks help, kittens should be microchipped and responsibly rehomed, and the mother cat should be sterilised at low or no cost.
- Breeder approval fees should not apply to accidental litters advertised as free or give-away through an approved sterilisation and rehoming pathway.

4. Enforcement

Compliance should be redesigned from a complaint-led, punishment model to an assistance-first, targeted and data-driven model. Enforcement should be reserved for repeated, deliberate and serious non-compliance after reasonable assistance has been offered.

- The highest burdens of free-roaming cats, complaints, impoundments and euthanasia are concentrated in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Enforcement-only approaches can therefore fall hardest on people with the least capacity to comply.
- Legal duties are difficult to enforce where a cat has no microchip, tag or identifiable owner. Behaviour, appearance and body condition are not reliable evidence of ownership or feral status (Slater et al., 2010; Slater et al., 2013).
- Councils should be funded to provide free or low-cost sterilisation, microchipping, transport, registration assistance if retained, community engagement and amnesty options.
- Animal Management Officers should be supported and trained as problem-solvers, with fines and prosecution used only where assistance fails (Moss et al., 2023; Cotterell et al., 2025a).
- Mandated containment should not be introduced. It is a social justice issue which unfairly affects disadvantaged owners and tenants and may result in them having to surrender their companion; it is a barrier to cat carers adopting stray cats if they are in immediate breach of the law; it is difficult and costly to enforce as most free-roaming cats have no identifiable owner to contain them; and most cat owners who can contain their cat are doing so. Importantly, it does not reduce complaints, impoundments or euthanasia (Cotterell et al., 2025b).
- Nuisance cat issues are more effectively managed initially using an assistive, problem-solving approach and where that fails, local laws designed to address nuisance issues can be enforced.
- Mandated cat limits (typically 2-4 cats before a costly permit is required) should not be introduced. They are a barrier to cat carers adopting a stray cat. Instead, use local laws designed to address nuisance issues, and state animal welfare laws, where appropriate.
- Where threatened native species occur in urban areas, protective fencing or other measures should be publicly funded rather than imposed as a private cost. Threatened and endangered species are a state asset.

5. Additional suggestions

The Act should be administered as a prevention and support framework. Two reforms are especially important: cat definitions and public reporting.

- Adopt RSPCA-consistent definitions distinguishing domestic cats from feral cats. Location and dependence on human-associated resources should be central; fearful behaviour after trapping and lack of a microchip or collar should not be used to classify an urban cat as feral (RSPCA Australia, 2018).
- Retain the current WA approach that recognises a person, business or organisation ordinarily keeping and caring for a cat as an owner. This allows semi-owned cats to enter Community Cat Programs for sterilisation, microchipping and ongoing care.
- Measure what matters. Local governments and animal welfare agencies should report annual cat intake, source, age, microchip and sterilisation status, outcomes including reclaimed, rehomed and euthanised, complaints, enforcement activity, expenditure and program participation.
- Require Domestic Animal Management Plans modelled on Victoria, with annual review and public reporting so communities can assess whether strategies are reducing nuisance, overpopulation, pound intake and euthanasia.

6. Successful initiatives from other jurisdictions

Western Australia should adopt targeted, adequately funded Community Cat Programs modelled on programs in Victoria, Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. These programs focus on the on locations with the highest cat-related complaints, cat impoundments or kitten surrenders and provide high-intensity sterilisation, microchipping, caregiver engagement, practical support and rehoming pathways.

- Banyule, Victoria: a council-funded free sterilisation, microchipping and registration program was associated with a 66% reduction in cat intake, 82% reduction in euthanasia, 36% reduction in cat-related calls city-wide and savings exceeding program costs (Cotterell et al., 2024).
- Ipswich, Queensland: APWF's Community Cat Program provided free sterilisation, microchipping and preventive care and, by the third year, was associated with 60% lower intake, 85% lower euthanasia and 39% fewer cat-related calls (Rand et al., 2024a).
- Greater Sydney, NSW: the StrayCare Metro/Keeping Cats Safe at Home model sterilised 1,225 cats and was associated with substantial reductions in council pound intake, complaints and numbers of free-roaming cats (Ma et al., 2026).
- Victoria's reporting model should be adopted and strengthened. WA should require all local governments and shelters to report annual cat data publicly, including intake, outcomes and reasons for euthanasia (Agriculture Victoria, 2026).

In Summary: the most effective reforms are those that make compliance achievable and directly reduce the number of unsterilised and unidentified cats in the community. WA should prioritise support, data, targeted sterilisation and community partnerships rather than increasing legal obligations without the services needed to make those obligations practical.

References cited

- Agriculture Victoria. (2026). Animal Welfare Victoria. Mandatory reporting of animal welfare outcomes in shelters and pounds. Available online: Mandatory reporting of animal welfare outcomes in shelters and pounds | Domestic Animals Act | Animal Welfare Victoria | Livestock and animals | Agriculture Victoria.
- Alberthsen, C., Rand, J., Morton, J., Bennett, P., Paterson, M., & Vankan, D. (2016). Numbers and Characteristics of Cats Admitted to Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) Shelters in Australia and Reasons for Surrender. *Animals*, 6(3), 23. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani6030023>
- Chua, D., Rand, J., & Morton, J. (2023). Stray and Owner-Relinquished Cats in Australia-Estimation of Numbers Entering Municipal Pounds, Shelters and Rescue Groups and Their Outcomes. *Animals*, 13(11), 1771. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani13111771>
- Chu, K., Anderson, W. M., & Rieser, M. Y. (2009). Population characteristics and neuter status of cats living in households in the United States. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 234(8), 1023-1030. <https://doi.org/10.2460/javma.234.8.1023>
- Cotterell, J. L., Rand, J., Barnes, T. S., & Scotney, R. (2024). Impact of a Local Government Funded Free Cat Sterilization Program for Owned and Semi-Owned Cats. *Animals*, 14(11), 1615. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani14111615>
- Cotterell, J., Rand, J., & Scotney, R. (2025). Urban Cat Management in Australia-Evidence-Based Strategies for Success. *Animals*, 15(8), 1083. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani15081083>
- Cotterell, J., Rand, J., & Scotney, R. (2025b). Rethinking Urban Cat Management-Limitations and Unintended Consequences of Traditional Cat Management. *Animals*, 15(7), 1005. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani15071005>
- Cotterell, J. L., Rand, J., Scotney, R., & Dutton-Regester, K. (2026). Containment, compliance, and consequence: Evaluating cat containment laws in Victoria, Australia. Unpublished data.
- Goodwin, K., Rand, J., Morton, J., Uthappa, V., & Walduck, R. (2018). Email reminders increase the frequency that pet owners update their microchip information. *Animals*, 8(2), 20. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani8020020>
- Lancaster, E., Rand, J., Collecott, S., & Paterson, M. (2015). Problems associated with the microchip data of stray dogs and cats entering RSPCA Queensland shelters. *Animals*, 5(2), 332-348. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani5020332>
- Ma, G. C., Zito, S., & Kennedy, B. P. A. (2026). StrayCare Metro: Evaluation of a Targeted Cat Desexing Program to Manage Free-Roaming Cats. *Animals*, 16(8), 1216. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani16081216>
- McDowall, S., Hazel, S. J., Hamilton-Bruce, M. A., Stuckey, R., & Howell, T. J. (2024). Association of Socioeconomic Status and Reasons for Companion Animal Relinquishment. *Animals*, 14(17), 2549. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani14172549>
- Moss, L. R., Hawes, S. M., Connolly, K., Bergstrom, M., O'Reilly, K., & Morris, K. N. (2023). Animal Control and Field Services Officers' Perspectives on Community Engagement: A Qualitative Phenomenology Study. *Animals*, 13(1), 68. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani13010068>
- Rand, J., Saraswathy, A. M., Verrinder, J., & Paterson, M. B. A. (2024a). Outcomes of a Community Cat Program Based on Sterilization of Owned, Semi-Owned and Unowned Cats in a Small Rural Town. *Animals*, 14(21), 3058. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani14213058>
- Rand, J., Scotney, R., Enright, A., Hayward, A., Bennett, P., & Morton, J. (2024b). A Situational Analysis of Attitudes toward Stray Cats and Preferences and Priorities for Their Management. *Animals*, 14(20), 2953. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani14202953>
- RSPCA Australia. (2018). Identifying Best Practice Domestic Cat Management in Australia. RSPCA Australia.